三秋縋
僕が電話をかけていた場所
メディアワークス文庫

The Place I Called From

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Chapter 7: The Summer Triangle, or Square

The rain that had fallen since yesterday finally stopped by noon. As I stepped carefully down the road with puddles here and there, children on bikes rushed past me from behind one after another. One of them was shouting something and pointing - at a large, clear rainbow. I stopped and gazed at it for a few seconds. Once I looked back down to start walking again, the children were already nowhere to be seen.

Maybe they'd gone in search of something at the end of that rainbow, I thought.

There's a superstition that a pot of gold lies at the end of a rainbow. I never really liked that. I wasn't pleased with the idea that buried under something beautiful was something beautiful. I was the one of those people who wanted there to be a corpse buried under a cherry blossom.

Things that were "just beautiful" made me uneasy. I worried that someone out there was taking the hit to balance out that beauty. Would be nice for there to be a graveyard at the start of a rainbow, I thought. I wanted those brilliant seven colors to have been brought about by a thousand-some piles of bones. Since maybe then I could innocently appreciate the beauty of a rainbow a little more.

On a visit to the town library, I reunited with the girl searching for ghosts. While putting my 100 yen in the vending machine and choosing my juice, I noticed a girl holding a parasol standing in front of another machine. She was frozen with her 100 yen in hand, staring at the options as if facing the most important decision of her

life. Noticing me looking, she raised her parasol and looked at me.

“Ah, mister.” Her eyes widened, then she bowed her head. “Good day. How unexpected we’d meet here.”

“Suppose you wouldn’t be looking for ghosts *all* day.”

“Well, that’s not quite true.” She hoisted up the bag under her arm. “Both of the two books I checked out today are on ghosts.”

“Fantastic,” I commended.

“You think it’s stupid, don’t you?” Her mouth twisted. “Go ahead. For I truly am stupid. My grades are awful, too.”

“I wasn’t saying it ironically. I really think it’s fantastic. Don’t be too normal, please.”

The girl glared at me in silence for a while, but her expression suddenly softened, and she pointed at a bench on the road facing the library.

“If you don’t mind, can we talk for a bit?”

We bought our juices and slowly drank them on the bench together. From the thicket behind the library, I heard an ear-aching cicada buzz.

“By the way, what sort of entities do you think ghosts are?”, I asked. “I mean, people have their own perspectives on them. Some think they’re entities that watch over you from close by, and others think they have grudges, cursing and killing people. And some think they can’t interfere with living people - they’re just there. So I wanna know your view.”

“Did you forget? I told you, I don’t believe in ghosts in the first place. A UFO, a cryptid, anything will do,” she said with a demure look. “It’s simply... the town of Minagisa is bountiful with ghost stories, is it not? So for the time being, I’m searching for ghosts.”

“Then I’ll change up the question. What would you *like* ghosts

to be like?”

The girl took a sip of juice and stared into the sky. Her wet lips shimmered in the sunlight.

“Let’s see... I think ghosts should be in much suffering, hateful of the living, lamenting their circumstances. That’s what I’d want them to be.”

“Why?”

“If that were how it was, living would be a bit more preferable, wouldn’t it?”, she replied, still looking to the sky. “If all ghosts were peacefully watching over the living, I might find myself so jealous that I’d want to join them.”

“Ah. Makes sense.”

Maybe glad about my agreement, the girl’s feet swayed under the bench.

“Though once I grow old, I may come to say the exact opposite thing.”

“To affirm your approaching death?”

“Exactly.” She smiled under the parasol. “You understand an oddball like me so well, mister.”

“I’m not doing anything but talk naturally. If we understand each other, you must not be an oddball. Or else, I’m an oddball.”

“It’s the latter. No doubt,” she snickered.

“Come to think of it,” I said, “I forgot to mention, but don’t call me “mister.” We’re the same age.”

The girl peered at my face.

“I’d thought you were two or three years older,” she mumbled as her eyes wandered around. “...But can you let me keep on with that assumption?”

“I guess, but why?”

The girl averted her eyes. “The thought that I’m talking with a boy my age makes me so tense, I might just send back up my breakfast.”

I couldn’t resist a chuckle. “Got it. Let’s just say I’m older.”

“Indeed, that would be helpful.” She closed her eyes and sighed. Then she spoke cheerily to regain her spirits. “Say, I want to hear from you too, mister.”

“From me?”

“It’s unfair for me to do all the talking. Tell me something.”

I thought about it. I was bad at talking about myself. I’d always lived under the assumption that no one would have any interest in me, so I had far less “things to say about myself” saved up than a normal person.

Ultimately, having no topics worth bringing up, I decided to talk about something that was currently on my mind.

“Lately, I’ve been going to see the stars at night.”

“Ah, how wonderful. To think you had such a hobby.”

“Nah, it’s not my hobby. I’m just going along with it.”

“Hmm. Sounds like fun,” she said sulkingly. “I suppose you’re going with a girl?”

“Girls, and a guy too.”

“As I thought, so many friends.” Her shoulders drooped. “I feel betrayed.”

“For your information, counting you, I have about five friends total right now,” I explained with a pained smile. “It’s a mish-mash group. I’m the only one who’s acquainted with all of them, and I’m always struggling to make them get along.”

The girl stared closely at my face.

“That doesn’t sound like your kind of thing, mister. Tiring, isn’t

it?”

“Yeah, deathly so.”

Her cheeks softened at once. “Because you’re reaching out into unfamiliar territory. A good feeling.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed.

After getting home, I put the radio on a music station and continued to read the books I checked out from the library. Even with the windows open and fans blaring, it was hot enough to make sweat stains on my shirt. After dinner, I took a bath, then went straight to bed. At 1 AM, the alarm clock at my bedside went off. I slowly got up, quickly got ready, and left the house.

Even in the middle of the night, cicadas were buzzing in places on the road. Maybe they were confused by the streetlights and the persistent heat into thinking it was day. Or maybe cicadas who weren’t able to make noise during the day were doing their best to make up for it now. Lately, I’d witnessed the phenomenon of cicadas stopping all at once during the hottest part of the day numerous times. I guess it makes sense, but it seems even cicadas hate extreme heat.

The heat this summer was abnormal, to be sure. The news was reporting new record highs for days in a row, and even adults said this was the hottest summer they’d ever seen. The rainfall during rainy season had also been less than half the average, there were water shortages around the country, and some places were cutting off the water at night. Maybe all the ambulance sirens I’d been hearing were because of people collapsing from heat exhaustion.

After walking along, occasionally brushing away spider webs that came out of nowhere, I arrived at Yui Hajikano’s house. As

expected, Chigusa Ogiue was already waiting by the gate, and gave a little wave when she noticed me. Chigusa always faithfully wore her uniform when going out, but probably thinking a school uniform would just be suspicious at this hour, tonight she wore a shirt one-piece with thin stripes.

“Regular clothes today, huh?”, I pointed out.

Chigusa tugged on the sleeve of her one-piece worriedly. “It isn’t odd, is it?”

“It’s not. It suits you.”

“I see. Does it, now?” She smiled, swinging slightly left and right.

While talking with Chigusa about the heat wave, the back door opened silently and Hajikano appeared. She saw my face, then looked to Chigusa.

“Good evening, Hajikano,” Chigusa smiled, and Hajikano silently bowed her head.

The three of us went to Masukawa Hotel together. Opening the door to the rooftop, we saw Yuuya Hinohara there early, setting up a telescope. Seeing us arrive, he just said “Hey,” then beckoned to Hajikano. “Hajikano, help me with this.”

Hajikano stood beside the telescope, and Hinohara began to instruct. “Okay, I taught you how to tune the finder last time. You can do it yourself now, right?” Hajikano nodded wordlessly.

Chigusa and I watched from a distance as Hajikano tuned the telescope in silence and Hinohara supervised. Chigusa took peeks at me with a complicated smile on her lips.

“Why did it end up like this, you think?”

Yes, why had it come to this?

I retraced my memory to recall the day that had set it all off.

*

Back to the day Hajikano and I had a call together. The day a phone booth at an empty train station where Hajikano was and the phone at my house rang simultaneously.

Finally getting the chance to have a proper conversation with her, I at last spoke the feelings I'd kept in for years. The call ended before she could reply to them, but for the time being, it seemed like the roughness between us had been smoothed to some extent. I'd learned that Hajikano didn't really hate me, and got Hajikano to realize that I wasn't just pitying her. Just those two things made for a big step forward.

That night, right at 2 AM, I visited Hajikano's house. When Hajikano came out the back door in less than five minutes, she saw me and stopped.

I raised my hand and greeted her, and she glared at me like she wanted to say something. But that expression didn't have the hostility and hate there had been before. Depending on your point of view, it could be seen as merely covering for her embarrassment.

"Well, let's go see the stars, as usual," I said. "Like the night with the shooting stars."

Hajikano lightly shrugged with an amazed look, and giving neither a "fine" or "no," began to walk. For the first time, I got to walk toward the ruined hotel not tailing behind her, but alongside her.

As she sat on the chair on the rooftop and looked at the sky, I casually asked a question.

"If you like looking at stars this much, why not use a

telescope?”

“I want to,” she honestly replied. “But those things are expensive.”

“Ah,” I nodded. Then I suddenly thought of something. “Actually, I have a friend with a fairly pricey telescope.”

Sure enough, Hajikano latched on. “...Really?”

“Yeah. Would you want to borrow it?”

She kept silent. But if Hajikano didn’t instantly refuse, that usually meant agreement, I felt. Silence was her way of resistance.

“Okay, leave it to me. I’ll have it ready by tomorrow night.”

I didn’t get my hopes up for a true response, but after seeing two shooting stars, Hajikano spoke in a voice so quiet as to be practically inaudible.

“...Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” I bowed my head overly low. “I didn’t expect to get thanks. I’ll have to write that in my diary when I get home.”

“Hm.”

Hajikano turned away with displeasure.

The next morning, rubbing my sleepy eyes and walking under the blazing sun, I visited Hinohara’s house.

The flowers in the pots in a row under the shop overhang were all terribly wilted without exception. Only the morning glories wrapped around the window lattices had healthy blue and purple flowers. The drab mortar walls hadn’t been painted over for years, and there were dark cracks all over them. The entrance said “Bar” with a paper lantern hanging down, and the white electronic sign in front had the name of the place in deep blue letters, “Sea Roar.”

The outdoor air conditioning unit under the second floor window made a strange rattling noise.

It was still only ten, and the cicadas were holding back. I opened the creaking gate, went around to the dwelling-side door, and rang the doorbell. I counted to thirty, then rang it again, but there was no response.

I heard a familiar engine noise from the back of the house. I went to check it out and found Hinohara in a cramped, messy garage, fiddling with a scooter. Probably changing the oil; next to him was an oil can, a box wrench, and a cut-open water bottle.

“Want some help?”, I asked.

Hinohara turned around, and his eyes widened as he saw me. “Ohh, Fukamachi! Rare for you to visit. ...Here to have your revenge for three days ago, maybe?”

“That wouldn’t be a bad idea.” I picked up a monkey wrench in the corner of the garage and tapped it in my palm. “But I’ve got other business today. Hinohara, as I recall, don’t you have a telescope?”

“Yeah, I do. What about it?”

“I’d like to borrow it for a little while.”

He wiped the sweat off his brow with his arm.

“That’s real abrupt. Sheesh, you make fun of my hobbies so much, and now you’ve got an interest in astronomy?”

“I don’t remember making fun. And I’m not the one interested in astronomy. Someone I know likes to look at stars.”

Hinohara stared me down with his mouth half-open.

“Sorry, I’ve got no intent of lending it out. It’s valuable, so I’m not letting some ignorant amateur touch it.”

With that, he returned to work. He stopped the warmed-up

engine, put on vinyl gloves, removed the drain bolt, and caught the dripping oil in the water bottle. Once the old oil was all poured out, he retightened the bolt, opened the oil pump cap, and poured in new oil from the can. He closed the cap, started the engine, and again let it run for a while. I'd helped him with this many times in middle school, so I learned the process well.

"I really do need it. I'll repay you. And I'll forget all about the other day. I'll treat it with extreme caution so I don't break it."

"Do you know how to use it?"

"I'll start learning now."

"Come to me *after* you learn."

"I'm in a hurry. Please, I'm serious about this."

"Doesn't seem like you to beg like this," Hinohara said curiously. "Is there a woman involved?"

"Depends on your point of view," I said, muddling the answer.

"Then all the more reason you're not getting it. I don't want my precious telescope being used just to get a woman's attention."

I shrugged. "A girl I owe a lot to is really in the pits right now. She usually stays locked up in her room, but goes out at night just to see the stars. It seems like the only time she can feel at peace is when she's looking at the night sky. I want to help her out."

Hinohara stopped the engine, removed the oil cap, wiped it with a rag, then stuck it back in and checked the amount of oil. Confirming it to be sufficiently full, he tightened the cap and removed the vinyl gloves.

After taking the scooter to the back of the garage, he brought a folding table leaning against the wall over and set it up in front of me. Kneeling in front of the dent-filled wooden table, he rolled up his sleeves and put out an arm.

“The rules are simple,” Hinohara said. “We’re gonna arm-wrestle. As many times as you want. If you win even once, then I’ll lend you my telescope.”

“Arm wrestle?”, I repeated. “As if I have a chance of winning that?”

“I’m the one lending the telescope. What’s the point of giving you the advantage?”

“That’s still too unfair for me. I was hospitalized from graduation to the middle of last month. My whole body’s gotten weak.”

“Then give up. I don’t intend on changing my conditions.”

I reluctantly kneeled in front of the table. And I looked again at his shoulder, upper arm, and forearm in order. He worked out regularly, so they were all trained up very well. He was a man who wasn’t in the exercise club, but ranked first in the school in numerous physical tests. I had no shot at victory.

And yet, I couldn’t give up before I even started. I put my elbow on the table and grabbed Hinohara’s hand. With my left hand, I gripped the edge of the table.

“You ready?”, Hinohara asked. I nodded.

On his signal, I put all my energy into my right hand. It didn’t budge. Without exaggeration, it didn’t move a millimeter. As if his arm were affixed in place with screws. He gave me a cocky smile. Putting some slight force in his wrist, my wrist buckled at once. And he took it to the end in one motion. “One win,” he counted. My entire arm was numb, and sweat poured from my body. “Well then, round two?”, he said.

After ten rounds, my right hand shook against my will, and I had trouble moving my fingertips. The inside of my elbow hurt like

it was inflamed, and everything from my shoulder down felt incredibly hot.

Once my arm felt a little less numb, I doggedly put my elbow on the table. Hinohara, convinced of his victory, coolly talked to me in the midst of the match.

“Where did you get to know her?”

“Her?”, I looked up and asked. Sweat from my forehead went down my cheek and neck.

“The girl who almost got involved in the quarrel with Nogiyama three days ago.”

I attempted a surprise attack as he was talking, but he predicted it and instantly pushed back with even more force. I clicked my tongue, then answered him. “Ogiue? She’s just a classmate. She has the seat next to me.”

“You go see the stars in the middle of the night with “just a classmate”?”

“Stars?” I twisted my neck. “Oh, Hinohara, were you under the impression I’m stargazing with Ogiue? She’s totally unrelated to this. The one I see stars with is a different girl...”

Just as I got that far, the force in Hinohara’s arm suddenly weakened. I wasn’t sure what happened, but I noticed it, and used all my remaining might to bring his arm down.

For a while, Hinohara looked curiously at his arm which suddenly became non-functional during the match.

“...A promise is a promise.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Alright, fine. I don’t want to, but I’ll lend you my telescope.”

“Thanks,” I said, wiping the sweat from my brow and massaging my right arm all over.

“But I have a condition. If you don’t accept, we’re back to

square one.”

“I’ll accept most conditions,” I replied. “What is it?”

“When you use the telescope, you have to take me along.”

“...Uh, hold on. That’s a problem.” I shook my head. “I’ll study up on how to use it, so don’t accompany me, please.”

“No way. I won’t yield to this one.”

“A guy like you would scare her, Hinohara.”

“If she’d get friendly with you, Fukamachi, I’m sure she can get friendly with me too.”

“We’re old acquaintances. You, not so much.”

The dispute continued until noon, and Hinohara really wasn’t going to submit. So I decided to borrow his phone and call Hajikano’s house.

Hajikano’s older sister Aya answered the phone.

“Can you hand it over to Miss Yui? If you say it’s about the telescope, she should come out of her room.”

“Telescope?, Aya repeated, it not ringing a bell for her. “Well, whatever. I don’t understand, but if you say so, Yocchan, I’ll try it. Hold on a second.”

Not a minute later, Hajikano came to the phone. “...It’s been handed over.”

“First, the good news,” I began. “After some discussion, I’ve been allowed to loan the telescope. ...Now, the bad news is, the guy who owns it won’t allow it to be used without him coming along. I wouldn’t say he’s a bad guy or anything, but I’m turning him down if you don’t agree, Hajikano. What do you want to do?”

“If he’ll lend a telescope, it doesn’t matter,” Hajikano answered simply.

“You’re really sure?”, I pressed. “Isn’t that a special place for

you? You aren't opposed to outsiders knowing about it?"

"I don't really think much of it. Also, *you* already know about it, Yosuke."

"...Well, uh, that's true."

Bewildered by Hajikano's demeanor softening up so much quicker than expected, I suddenly realized something.

"If it's okay, can I bring another girl along? It might be uncomfortable with two guys, right?"

Hajikano replied with silence showing neither agreement nor disapproval.

"You had a classmate at Mitsuba Middle School named Chigusa Ogiue, right?", I asked.

"Maybe," Hajikano answered.

"I'm thinking of bringing her. Would you mind that?"

After another long pause, Hajikano spoke. "It doesn't matter."

"Then I'll see about inviting Ogiue. Wait for me to come by at 2 AM tonight. See you."

Lastly, Hajikano softly muttered, "...Thanks."

"Don't mention it." I hung up.

"It's decided," Hinohara remarked, seeing me end the call. "Now, what about the location?"

"Remember Masukawa Hotel? We go there all the time to look at stars on the rooftop."

"Ahh, the "Red-Room Ruins." Hung out there a bunch in middle school," Hinohara nodded, full of nostalgia. "But why go out to such a dangerous place?"

"Hajikano seems to have a liking for the place."

"The heck? Weird girl." He tilted his head. "Oh well. Just gotta be on the roof of Masukawa Hotel by 2, right?"

“Yeah. Make sure you do it.”

“’Course. A promise is a promise.”

After leaving Hinohara, I called Chigusa from the nearest public phone. I couldn’t raise my right arm after the arm wrestling, so I carefully dialed the numbers one by one with my left.

“Hello?”, Chigusa said through the phone.

“Do you have time right now?”, I asked.

“Fukamachi? This is Fukamachi, is it not?” Her voice lit up slightly. “Of course, I have time. What is it you need?”

“I have another request for you, Ogiue.”

“A request... Concerning Hajikano, I presume?”

“Yeah, you got it.” Feeling like attempting to hide it would only have the opposite effect, I truthfully explained the situation. “I’m planning to see the stars with Hajikano tonight, but some things came up, and now a guy named Hinohara is coming along. But I’m sure Hajikano would feel uncomfortable around two former delinquents. I think having a girl like you around might mitigate that. So I called.”

“In other words, I’m to be a front in order to get close with Hajikano?”

“Can’t help it if you take it that way. But I don’t have anyone else I can ask. Of course, you can refuse if you want.”

Chigusa gave a deep sigh. “...Well, I am the one who said “If there’s anything I can assist with, let me know.” Very well, I’ll assist you.”

“Thanks. I’m in your debt.”

“Playing with people’s love... You truly are a natural-born bad boy, Fukamachi,” Chigusa said playfully. “But please, do not forget this. I, too, am a bad person just like you. If you’re negligent, I may

just steal you away from Hajikano."

"I'm aware of that danger. I'll be careful."

"No, no. Please, be negligent," Chigusa snickered. "When and where should we meet?"

"Wait at her house at 2 AM. I'll come pick you up."

"Understood. I look forward to it."

"Can you sneak away without your parents finding out?"

"I'll be all right. As my father and mother would not even dream of me going out in the night."

I put down the receiver and headed for the small local library, checked out a book on telescope operation, and skimmed through the whole thing. I diligently read for the first two hours or so, but all the astronomy terms I'd never seen before and cross-sections of various lenses got me incredibly sleepy, and I fell asleep without realizing. It was gloomy outside when I woke up. I went home, had dinner with my mother, lay down in bed and read over the book again. A brief nap left me leaving the house pretty much right on time.

The meeting of Hajikano and Chigusa, root of my worries, went smoother than I thought. As Hajikano tried to hide behind my back, Chigusa spoke to her very naturally.

"We haven't met in some time, Hajikano."

Hajikano nodded, her lips tight and straight. It wasn't a disinterested nod, but one that, while nervous, was a proper response to Chigusa's greeting.

"I did not expect to meet with you again in a way like this. You never know what destiny holds."

Thinking about it, in the three months I was hospitalized,

Chigusa and Hajikano probably saw each other often, since the former sat behind the latter. As far as I could tell, Hajikano had no ill will toward Chigusa. I didn't sense Chigusa had issues with Hajikano either. Though the degrees of it varied, maybe there was some resonation given their general lack of friendliness with classmates.

Hinohara came to the ruins early to set up the telescope, so his meeting with Hajikano was slightly postponed. According to him, the telescope lens and reflector took a while to adapt to the night air, and if you didn't let it adjust to outdoor temperature one or two hours before viewing, the seeing would have distortions. Tuning the finder also seemed to be easier in lighter hours. Masukawa Hotel happened to be a place Hinohara knew, so there was no problem letting him go on ahead.

The most pressing issue was avoiding a rejection of Hinohara from the other two. Hinohara would casually do rude things even to people he was just meeting or give them awful nicknames; in general, he had a prodigious talent for earning people's contempt. I needed to keep a handle on him in order to protect Hajikano and Chigusa from his innocent ill will. Once I arrived at the ruins, I braced myself for the three meeting. Though certainly, it would be best if nothing happened.

I also had to escort Chigusa who was unfamiliar with the ruins, so I brought a flashlight to light up the floor and proceed with care. At the rooftop, I turned off the flashlight and called to Hinohara, who was done setting up the telescope. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Ah, you're here." Hinohara put out his cigarette and tossed it in an empty can. Standing up and taking an electric lantern at his feet, he illuminated our three faces. Since our eyes weren't

adjusted to it, the lantern light seemed as dim as if it were about to go out.

Hinohara first looked at Chigusa's face with scrutiny. In a few seconds, the faint smile vanished from his lips. His eyes went round, and he looked all over Chigusa's face like an important message was written on it.

"Yuuya Hinohara," he said with bizarre respect, extending his right hand. "I was Fukamachi's best friend in middle school."

"I'm Chigusa Ogiue," Chigusa said, timidly extending her hand too and grabbing his. Not surprising she's afraid, I thought. She only recognized him as "one of the people who was standing around Fukamachi about to beat him up that day."

I whispered into Chigusa's ear. "Nothing to fear. He's not that bad a guy."

"Right. Not that bad a guy," Hinohara repeated. "Even if I am bad, it's strictly only as much as Fukamachi."

"Is that a fact? Then I'm relieved." Chigusa smiled, her tension still not gone.

Next, Hinohara brought the lantern to Hajikano's face. I held my breath and watched. He rudely glared at the birthmark.

"Awful bruise, there. Like the Ghost Story of Yotsuya."

If Hinohara made any more remarks so lacking in forethought, I might have punched him on reflex. But before I could even curl up my fist - and in fact, maybe to keep me in check - Hajikano replied plainly.

"Yes. It is awful, isn't it?"

"No exaggeration there," Hinohara affirmed. Then he inspected the other side without the birthmark.

"Then again, you've got a pretty good face all around."

Hinohara scratched his chin. “Can’t say if you’re a beauty or an ugly. ...Eh, if you ask me, there’s not much difference either way.”

Hajikano’s eyes narrowed from the light of the lantern. She at least didn’t seem irritated or hurt by his comments. In fact, she might have even appreciated the way he didn’t mince words. Maybe those with strong inferiority complexes can get along surprisingly well with wide-open people like Hinohara. In fact, that was one reason I chose Hinohara as an ally in middle school.

Chigusa brought her face close to mine. “Hinohara seems like a rather interesting sort.”

“He sure is. For better or worse.”

“In addition, he slightly resembles you.”

“Hinohara resembles me?”, I asked with surprise.

“Yes. You’re even about the same height, and have the same eyes. And I have to say, you have the same air about you.”

“Huh. ...I’m not too happy to hear that.”

Chigusa patted my back encouragingly. “It’s all right, you are the cooler of the two.”

“Thanks for that.”

Anyway, that was the biggest hurdle cleared. These four didn’t seem to be desperately incompatible. Hajikano evidently had no negative feelings toward the other two, and the same for Chigusa.

At that point, I suddenly saw myself objectively, and felt a new surprise - to think I would be in a position to be handling relationships between friends. It was the first time in my life I’d ended up with such a duty. Who could have guessed a role that should usually go to the one with most personality in the group would go to me of all people.

The first thing we saw was Saturn. After Hinohara adjusted the telescope, Hajikano, Chigusa, and I looked into it in order.

“If the seeing was a little bit better, there’d be enough detail to spot the gaps between rings,” Hinohara said. Probably means the Cassini Division, I thought, recalling the book I read before coming. When you view Saturn’s rings not as single thick rings but many small rings together, the three rings making up the main ring are called rings A, B, and C. And the giant gap between A and B is called the Cassini Division.

To avoid disturbing Hajikano as she looked into the telescope, we sat a few meters away and quietly conversed.

“I never asked, come to think of it, but Hinohara, why did you get into astronomy?”

“Why?” Hinohara groaned in thought as he lay down and looked into the sky. “How should I put it? In my case, the telescope came before the stars.”

“How do you mean?”

“Not fussing over the pictures, but simply liking the structure of the camera. Not fussing over the music, but liking the look of the vacuum tube amp. Not fussing over the taste of coffee, just liking the bean-grinding and dripping. It’s like that. I always liked the idea of carrying around a telescope and setting it up.”

“But you wouldn’t keep it up for long then, would you? It’s a pretty annoying hobby, honestly.”

“That’s what makes it good. What you’re going to see through the telescope and what I’m going to see through the telescope are the same thing, but there’s a completely different meaning to it. The same way a fish you caught yourself is tastier. Your brain beautifies it according to the amount of effort you put in. And as

soon as you see those already-beautiful planets and stars made more beautiful, you might just become a slave to astronomy."

"That's a beautiful point of view I can't believe I'm hearing from you," I said jokingly, but I wasn't lying about being impressed. "By the way, I wanted to ask your opinion on something... Why do you think Hajikano likes stars?"

"Hajikano? Oh, the girl with the birthmark." Hinohara sat up and looked at her back as she enthusiastically peered into the telescope. "Well, it might be the obvious answer, but for her, maybe she likes the darkness more than the stars."

"...I see."

That was a logical idea. She came to prefer darkness after her birthmark appeared, and in trying to find enjoyment in darkness, she met the stars. She definitely had that aspect to her, I thought. Of course, since her interest in the stars came far before her birthmark, surely his answer was only one of many things facilitating her appreciation.

"Of course, when you get down to it, reasons for "liking" anything are always after the fact," Hinohara added. "People who like stars are just born such that they'll like stars, and that's really all it is."

"You got that right," I agreed.

After Hajikano, Chigusa looked into the telescope and let out a cheer. "Wow. Fukamachi, Fukamachi, this is really something amazing."

Hurried by Chigusa, I too stood at the telescope and looked into the lens.

A lonely sphere floating in the darkness, and giant rings encircling it. It was a unique shape even kindergarteners were

familiar with. Yet looking at the real thing through a lens like this, it seemed like a bad joke. Was it acceptable for such an illogically-shaped thing to exist in this world? Since I'd been taught that Saturn had this shape, I was able to leave it at that, but how bewildered would someone who didn't know anything about Saturn be at the sight of this?

While I was being overwhelmed by Saturn's appearance, Hinohara spoke from behind me.

"Seeing you looking into a telescope like this reminds me of that night on our class trip."

"...You're as detestable as ever," I quietly replied.

"What is this about?" Sure enough, Chigusa showed interest in the story.

"Oh, it's nothing big," Hinohara began in a lively voice. "There was an open air bath at the place we stayed for our third year class trip. And on the third night, it came to light that we could lean forward and use binoculars to see from our room to the stairs connecting the women's interior bath and the open air bath. The next day we did some on-site procurement of binoculars, and that night took turns looking through 'em. Eh, Fukamachi?"

"Hmm... So Fukamachi would also do such things." Chigusa gave me a mix of a scornful look and a teasing one.

"So what? If I were the only one who didn't look in that situation, that'd make it more suspicious," I excused, then went on the counterattack. "You know, Hinohara, you always did have a habit of trying to tease me around the girls you were into."

"You've got that wrong," Hinohara replied without delay. "I just like teasing you."

"How friendly." Chigusa grinned with a hand over her mouth.

Hinohara and I shrugged, like saying “I wonder about that.” Then the three of us looked toward Hajikano, still plastered to the telescope and not tiring of looking at Saturn.

“Does she like stars that much?”, Hinohara asked me, lowering his voice so she didn’t hear.

“Yeah. I mean, she comes out here every night just to see them.”

“Every night? You sure there isn’t some other objective?”

“No, nothing. I can be sure of that.”

“Huh. Weird gal.” Hinohara stared at Hajikano’s back like he was making sure of something.

“Hey, ghost of Oiwa,” he dubbed Hajikano. “You gonna get tired of Saturn already?”

Hajikano took her eyes away from the lens and shook her head at Hinohara. “I’m not tired of it.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I am. So I’m gonna have you point the telescope at the moon now. You know how to do that?”

“...Maybe.”

“Okay, take it away. Tell me when you’ve got a good view of the moon’s surface.”

Hajikano bowed her head deeply and carefully began to fiddle with the telescope.

“Well now, you’re using the finder right. Way to go,” Hinohara remarked happily.

“You say it’s too important to want an ignorant novice touching it, then you let a girl you just met fiddle with it,” I pointed out. “So much for that.”

“It’s alright, she won’t break it,” Hinohara said confidently.

“Y’know, I did study up on this too. Even learned how to read

star maps.”

“That’s some good spirit. But I can’t trust you since your motives are impure.”

Hinohara seemed to grow impatient while watching Hajikano take her time, so he stood up with a flashlight covered in red cellophane and began giving instructions next to her. “Dummy, first you wanna use the low-magnification eyepiece. Once you line up the focal point, then you can increase magnification.”

“I don’t know how to change eyepieces,” Hajikano complained.

“Then just ask me. Are you stupid?”

“...How do I do it?”, Hajikano nervously asked.

Chigusa and I watched the two mess with the telescope from behind.

“People who understand what you like are wonderful,” Chigusa whispered.

“Yeah. I really couldn’t get deep into one thing like that,” I remarked. “Maybe I can’t have that much confidence in my hobbies.”

“I know that feeling. I expect that I’ll at some point get bored or frustrated, and put in less effort as a precautionary measure.”

Looking at Hinohara giving annoyed instructions and Hajikano reluctantly following them, my heart slightly ached. It was a strange sensation I’d never experienced before. At that point, I wasn’t conscious of it being the emotion known as jealousy. Maybe I had experienced it because of my inferiority, but I’d given up on myself to the point that I didn’t compare myself to others, and lived a life where I would never have jealousy toward specific people. As a result, I didn’t know the name to give to that feeling I was having for the first time.

I felt a vague ill omen. Maybe I've opened a door that I shouldn't have opened, I thought.

And that omen was for a not-too-distant future.

"Fukamachi, what is the matter?", Chigusa asked worriedly as I fell silent.

"Nothing. Just had a strange feeling."

"Indeed. ...It is strange."

Hajikano turned around to glance at us, then went right back to the telescope.

Around 4 AM, when the sky began turning violet, we left the ruins. With an uneventful farewell, we all returned to our respective houses.

Yet by some strange alignment of the stars - or rather, maybe an alignment caused *by* stars - from then on, me, Hajikano, Chigusa, and Hinohara came to assemble at the ruins every night as if called there.

The most surprising part of this was that Hinohara kept bringing his telescope and setting it up on the roof of the hotel every time without anyone asking him to. Of course, I assume he did it not out of purely good will, but mostly as an excuse to meet with Chigusa. I didn't know how serious he was, but Hinohara seemed to like Chigusa, and kept trying to extract information about her from me (which I always evaded).

Chigusa's reason for being there every night, as she told it, was to prevent me and Hajikano from being alone together. Once, right when Hajikano and Hinohara were focused on the telescope, I asked Chigusa why she kept coming. She glared at me with dissatisfaction and lightly bumped her forehead into my shoulder.

“Is it not obvious I want to prevent you and Hajikano from meeting in secret?”, she said without fear. “Are you not even aware of that?”

“...I’ve been meaning to ask, but what exactly do you see in me?”, I asked. “It’s honestly a mystery to me.”

“Think about it for yourself, you miscreant.” Chigusa turned away.

And the all-important Hajikano - the one who was coming to the roof every night without anyone asking her to. I thought her acceptance of us three intruders was simply due to the telescope. But lately, I’d come to see that differently.

Maybe... Possibly... Potentially.

Perhaps Hajikano wasn’t focused on the telescope, but *Hinohara*.

I began to think this after an event a few days into our stargazing. I was with Chigusa, watching Hinohara and Hajikano set up the telescope from behind. Hajikano had quickly taken the role of Hinohara’s assistant, and came to follow his instructions and change lenses, adjust the finder, check star maps without any look of displeasure. Hajikano seemed to enjoy those tasks, and Hinohara trusted her as an astronomy lover, and he was freely letting her touch the telescope he wouldn’t usually let anyone have.

As Hinohara finished preparing and called to us, there was the sudden sound of a car engine in the distance. He put up a finger to silence us and closed his eyes to listen close.

“It’s coming this way,” he groaned. “I can tell from the sound of the engine. Probably the guys who hang out around the mountain pass. They might be out on a dare or something.”

He was exactly right. After a while, the engine sound stopped

near the building, and we heard people getting out and doors shutting. The voices sounded like three or four guys in their twenties. They seemed to be headed right for us.

“We should probably hide,” I suggested. “We don’t want to have a run-in with those guys.”

“We’ve got two ladies here.” Hinohara looked at Hajikano and Chigusa and scratched his head. “Alright, fine. Fukamachi, you hide these two. A dumpster, an incinerator, wherever. In the meantime, I’ll put away the telescope.”

“Got it,” I nodded. “Hajikano, Ogiue, come with me.”

Chigusa followed, but Hajikano just stood there thinking about something. “Hajikano, hurry,” I said, trying to grab her hand. But her hand slipped away, and she ran over to Hinohara to help him disassemble the telescope.

Maybe Hajikano figured it would be more efficient to look for places for all four of us to hide after putting away the telescope. Figuring she wouldn’t get in Hinohara’s way, she instantly chose to help him disassemble, ignoring me. That was a perfectly rational notion.

Yet, even knowing that, I felt an indescribable unease the moment Hajikano slipped away from my hand and ran over to Hinohara. I felt like that action was more than it seemed.

Ultimately, the guys on a dare never came to the roof - they wandered the first floor, smashed some windows, and left in about thirty minutes. While waiting for them to leave, we held our breath hiding behind a structure on the roof. Once the car was out of earshot, we sighed with relief and got out to stretch. We felt strangely elated to be free from the tension, and me, Hinohara, and Chigusa laughed. Hajikano’s expression seemed a little less stiff

than usual, too.

After that day, I began watching with caution when Hajikano interacted with Hinohara. And I saw that she frequently showed relaxed expressions to him that she never showed to me. Once I became aware of it, I kept finding proof that Hajikano looked at Hinohara in a special way.

It seemed Hajikano was captivated by him. Even someone as estranged from people's feelings as me could tell what a favorable attitude she had around him. With him around, she instantly smiled more, and when he left, she looked blatantly gloomier.

Her actions gradually became easier to understand. While stargazing on the roof, she came to dangle after Hinohara. I wasn't sure if it was out of love, or friendship between fellow likers of astronomy. But at the very least, Hajikano seemed to be having considerably more fun hearing about astronomy from Hinohara than being alone with me. Once I noticed that fact, my vision went black. Every time I saw them getting close and chatting since, my pulse wouldn't calm down, and I felt despair like sinking to the dark sea bottom.

Wasn't this Andersen's The Little Mermaid exactly? Out of love for Hajikano, I put my life on the line to remove my birthmark, but in trying to save her from her predicament, another man snatched away the credit. It had a lot of overlap with the fate of the little mermaid, obtaining a human form out of love for the prince, but another woman taking credit for her saving his life.

But I was unable to blame Hinohara. It's not like he tried to lead Hajikano astray. He just liked a girl who had his same interest in stars, cordially answering to her desire.

Also, through this stargazing, Hinohara and I reattained a

comfortable friendship like we had in middle school. I hated to admit it, but even I took a liking to him. In the end, Hinohara knew me best, and I knew Hinohara best. It was hard to hate him. And it was none other than me who got these two together who never would have otherwise. *I sowed the seeds here.*

I absolutely wanted to get Hajikano back, but looking at her passionately listening to Hinohara, I came to think of myself as a nuisance. Forcibly trying to pull them apart at this point would only make her sad. I went to the library almost every day to try and catch up to Hinohara's astronomy knowledge, but cramming didn't cut it at all. Rather, the more I studied, the more I realized the tremendous extent of his knowledge.

The one small salvation was that Hinohara was captivated by Chigusa rather than Hajikano, but I felt pathetic thinking of that as a salvation. When I noticed myself wishing deep down that Chigusa would reciprocate Hinohara, I felt like vanishing off the face of the Earth from embarrassment.

Out of the four of us on the rooftop, my head was the most dirty. Sure, I'd gotten a normal appearance, but this time it was my mind that was ugly beyond compare. It hadn't been like this when I had my birthmark. As soon as I felt like I'd gotten something, it turned to greed, and that greed threw my heart into disarray.

Sitting next to Chigusa, sipping on iced tea she made, I watched Hajikano and Hinohara with the telescope between them and drew a long sigh.

"Not going so well, is it," Chigusa remarked as if knowing what I was thinking.

"Yeah. Not so well," I repeated like an incoherent mutter.

"All the gears are out of sorts in such strange ways. If only

there were some deus ex machina to fix it."

"Yeah. I'd only want to change the directions of two arrows."

"Two?" Chigusa tilted her head, ignorant of the arrow pointing from Hinohara to her.

"Why did it have to be like this?", I mumbled to myself.

"...While it seems unsatisfactory to you, Fukamachi, I like these relations," Chigusa responded. "Of course, the biggest reason is that I can be with you. But that isn't the only thing. Somehow, the four of us being together feels very natural."

I thought about it for a while, then spoke. "Yeah, I don't want to admit it, but I feel the same way."

"Right?", Chigusa smiled. "Who knows how long it will go on, but I adore this time. I pray it can go on as long as possible. ...Of course, if you were to pick me, that would be a different story."

Every time Chigusa stated her affection like that, my heart ached. For one thing, I couldn't face her feelings head-on, but more than that, it was an ache of guilt over the fact that the "me" she was loving wasn't my real appearance, so I was in some sense fooling her.

"Hey, Ogiue."

Unable to bear it, I asked in a roundabout way. Or confessed, maybe.

"If the Fukamachi you were looking at right now was a fake, what would you do? For instance, if my face were actually much uglier, do you think you would still have this sort of relationship with me?"

Chigusa tilted her head with a stare.

"Ah, do you perhaps mean *the birthmark*?", she said casually. "If I hated you that much, I could never love you from the start. In

fact, if you were to go back to when you had the birthmark, it would help to reduce competition."

Seeing how I was too shocked to put together a reply, Chigusa laughed like at a joke.

"Did you think I was that unknowledgeable about you? I should have you know, I want to know about you just as much as you want to know about Hajikano."

"...I'm getting really fed up with my own ignorance."

I put my hands on the floor and stared up at the sky.

Chigusa had noticed it, and even I was faintly aware. These times wouldn't last too long. A break would inevitably come in the not-too-distant future.

August 7th was a new moon. Pointing binoculars at the sky, in the Milky Way between Vega and Altair, we could observe star clusters and nebulae.

The night of August 12th, without taking any telescope or binoculars, we climbed the highest hill in town and lay down to see the Perseid Meteor Shower. The one the guidance counselor Endou had told us not to miss. From 1991 to 1994, due to the influence of the returning parent body Swift-Tuttle, the Perseid Meteor Shower was setting record numbers far above the yearly average. On the night of the 12th, it hit its peak, and we saw an average of about 50 shooting stars per hour. Some people would never get to see this many in their entire lifetime, I thought. Hajikano's innocent smile as she watched the stars go by left a strong impression on me. I thought it was proof that she was on the way to improvement.

On August 13th, it rained, and for the first time in a while we spent the night alone.

On August 14th, it rained more than the day before.

On August 15th, unbeknownst to anyone, Hajikano plunged into the sea.

And just like that, our short relations met an end.

Chapter 8: Save the Last Dance for Me

The phone rang at 2 PM on August 14th. I was perusing an astronomy book in my room at the time, studying the movement of variable binary stars. It was pouring outside, raindrops beat against the window, and wind relentlessly blew through the trees. My parents were out at work, so I was home alone.

When I heard the phone, I tossed away my book and ran down the stairs to grab the receiver.

“Hello?”

There was no reply. A long silence. It had to be a call from Hajikano, I figured. I couldn’t imagine anyone but her doing this.

“Is this Hajikano?”, I asked the caller. But still, no reply.

It didn’t seem to me that this was a repeat of before, where two phones rang at once and the theoretically separate lines somehow got connected. This silence was full of conviction, leaving me an impression that the caller was staying silent with full awareness I was on the other end. However, it did feel like a hesitating silence of whether or not to say something, rather than a purposeful lack of speaking.

And suddenly, the call ended. What was that all about?, I wondered as I put down the phone.

The sound of the rain seemed strangely clear, and I noticed the window was left open, with a puddle forming. I closed it, wiped the puddle up with a rag, and went around checking the other windows.

Once back in my room, I thought about that phone call again. And I had a sudden thought.

Maybe I should have been the one to start talking.

Maybe she wasn't being silent, but waiting for my words.

I felt uneasy. Putting a yacht parka over my shirt, I went out without even an umbrella and rode my bicycle to Hajikano's house. Arriving in a few minutes, I mashed on the doorbell repeatedly. A few seconds later, Aya showed her face.

"...Huh, Yocchan?", she said with disappointment. That reaction seemed to confirm my bad premonition.

"Something happened to Yui, didn't it?", I asked.

"Yeah," Aya nodded. "You look like you know something. Come inside. I'll lend you a towel."

"Let's talk here, please."

Aya, mid-turning on her heel, turned back to me and sighed.

"Yui's gone missing. She left the house like usual last night and hasn't come back. Of course, that alone wouldn't be worrisome. It's not that rare for her to be gone for over a day, and maybe she's late to come home because of the rain. ...But I get kind of a bad feeling this time."

I spoke after a slight hesitation. "There was a wordless call to my house earlier. I don't have proof, but I think it was from Yui. After about two minutes of silence, the call ended without explanation."

"If that was Yui, then she's still safe for now, huh..." She closed her eyes with relief.

"What's your bad feeling?"

"Thinking about it, she was kind of weird last night," Aya said, staring into the rain outside. "I happened to meet her in the kitchen just as she was leaving. I was hungry and fishing around in the fridge, and she was headed out the back door. Usually, Yui would just turn away from me, but yesterday was different. She stopped

at the kitchen door and gave me a solid look, blinking like she was seeing something unusual. I acted like I didn't notice. After about ten seconds, she stopped looking at me and went to the back door, but she bowed her head like giving a passing greeting. ...You know how unusual all that is, don't you, Yocchan?

"Did Yui not say anything then?"

"Nope, not a word." Aya's expression clouded slightly. "Uh, maybe I'm just overthinking it, but... When a classmate of mine died, she was the same way."

"Classmate?", I repeated.

"If I had to put it one way or the other, we got along poorly. She seemed to hate me, and I didn't like being hated away at, so I hated her back. In about autumn of my second year of middle school, she suddenly stopped coming to school. Then about a month later, I got a call from her, and she did all the talking. I wanted to ask why she didn't come to school, but she didn't seem to want to be asked, so I didn't. Just before she hung up, she said an uncharacteristic "Thanks for today." And that's it."

"That's it?"

"A few hours after the call, she killed herself." Aya's voice kept a fixed tone. "They found her hung in the woods by the sea. No note or anything. A few days after that, I realized. "Ah, so that call was a sign." That "thanks" was like her last words."

I digested her words. "Miss Aya, do you think Yui is going to kill herself?"

Thinking about it logically, that didn't follow. Lately, it seemed like Hajikano was headed in a happier direction. Hadn't she been enjoying herself watching the Perseid Meteor Shower? Why did she want to commit suicide now of all times?

No, or maybe... I thought about it. Maybe Hajikano seemed happier *because she'd already decided when she'd do it?* Because she knew that she could leave this world in a few days, she could innocently enjoy the moment?

"I don't know." Aya shook her head. "There's just that possibility. I've put out a search request, but they don't seem to be taking it seriously. Our parents are out looking right now."

"Then we should search for Yui too," I suggested. "The more, the better. I'll call some friends too. Sorry, but can I borrow your phone?"

"Use it as you like." She turned and pointed to a phone in the hall. "But sorry, I'm not coming along."

I replied in a somewhat harsh tone. "This is no time to be stubborn, is it? I guarantee it, if you do nothing and Yui kills herself, you'll regret it. It might be days or years from now, but you'll come to lament your actions today. You don't hate your sister as much as you think."

"Of course I know that," Aya said, her voice also getting rough. "But I'm waiting for a call from her. So I can't leave this spot."

"Are you certain she's going to call here?"

"Nope. But going looking now is pointless. If she really wants to die, we can't stop her. She's a very clever girl, so she won't let anyone find her. She might have long since killed herself already. ...But if she still has doubts, don't you think she might call here like she called you, Yocchan? Thinking of it that way, my best option is to wait for that call here."

Aya and I glared at each other for a while. I hated to admit it, but it made sense. If Hajikano had no intention of being found, wouldn't our search for her only end in vain? Was it all we could do

to wait for her determination to falter, and not miss the moment it tilted to our side?

But I had already let one such moment slip away. Chances were slim that we could wait for it to swing back. Which meant we had to take action.

I passed by Aya to the phone and first dialed Hinohara's house. After ten dial tones, Hinohara's brother answered. I asked if Hinohara was there, and he said he was out. When I asked if he knew where he was, he bluntly replied "Hell if I know!" and hung up. It was unlikely he went to set up the telescope in this weather, so I had no guesses either.

When I called Chigusa's house, she herself answered promptly.

"No time to explain details," I said first thing. "Hajikano's missing. Help me look for her."

"Err... This is Fukamachi, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Sorry to make you go out in the rain, but get ready to go quick."

"Did something happen to Hajikano?"

"I don't know. But her older sister says she has a bad feeling, and I agree with her. To tell the truth, just a month ago, I witnessed a suicide attempt by Hajikano. She might be trying it again."

I thought that explaining this much would get Chigusa to agree without another word.

But that wasn't the case.

She was silent, like time had stopped on the other end.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you saying anything?"

"Um, Fukamachi," Chigusa said calmly. "Please don't hate me for this. I'm about to say something slightly mean-spirited."

"There's no time to chat about..."

“Let us leave Hajikano be.”

At first, I thought I misheard her. No, it’s probably more like my brain refused to comprehend it.

Because the Chigusa I knew wouldn’t say something like that.

“What did you say?”, I asked, knowing there was no point in doing so.

Chigusa didn’t answer that, and spoke monotonously. “Say, Fukamachi. Are you familiar with the option of relief the witch provides to the little mermaid after another woman marries the prince?”

“...What in the world are you talking about?”

“*To kill the prince with a dagger.* If she pierced the prince’s heart and let the blood flow, her legs would revert to a tail, and she could once again live as a mermaid,” Chigusa said to answer herself. Then she pressed further. “The bet you’ve taken. What becomes of the conditions if Hajikano, holder of the key, dies? Whether your love would come to fruition would become an eternal mystery, and perhaps the bet could not conclude. Would that not save your life?”

“Wait,” I shouted to interrupt her. “Why do you know about the bet, Ogiue? I didn’t tell anyone about it...”

Of course, there was no reply.

“Luckily, Hajikano wishes her own death. You only need to respect her conviction. No need to use the dagger yourself. In addition,” she cleared her throat, “Fukamachi, do you believe the birthmark alone is the cause of Hajikano’s despair?”

“...I don’t suppose it has to do with what happened in those “blank four days”?”

“Exactly,” Chigusa affirmed. “With her death, she’ll atone for a certain sin.”

“Look, Ogiue, listen to me,” I pleaded. “I’m really interested in that too, and I’ve got lots of questions, like how you know all this stuff. But as we speak, Hajikano might be walking straight to her death. I have to go search for her.”

“Is that so,” Chigusa said with disappointment. “Well then, go ahead. I will be here praying that you don’t find her.”

The call ended. I had countless doubts, but I put them on hold and left Hajikano’s house. Before anything else, I went to Masukawa Hotel and searched every nook and cranny, but I found no sign of Hajikano. I went on to try the shrine park, the woods, Minagisa First High, our old elementary school, Chakagawa Station, all the places she might have fond memories of. As time passed, the storm got stronger, and I got as soaked as the time I fell into the pool, my sneakers so muddy you couldn’t tell their original color. Yet everywhere I looked, Hajikano wasn’t there. As Aya said, if she really wanted to kill herself without anyone finding her, it was impossible to stop her.

No... Maybe if I had understood Hajikano better, I could have figured out her destination. But I didn’t. In the end, I probably didn’t understand half of what she was thinking.

I checked Masukawa Hotel one last time, but she just wasn’t there. I returned to Hajikano’s house around 2 AM. I hesitated to ring the doorbell, so I knocked lightly on the door. Aya quickly answered. Seeing my face, she shook her head.

“No call, either?”

“Yep,” Aya nodded powerlessly. “And you?”

“I still haven’t found her. I think I might try the appropriate places one more time.”

“Enough. Aren’t you exhausted?”, she said pitifully. “Get some

rest. You can use our shower. Take off those wet clothes. Borrow some from my father."

"Thank you very much. But, no thanks. They'll just get wet again anyway."

Aya grabbed my shoulders. "Listen, take a break for at least thirty minutes. Do you know what color your face looks like, Yocchan? You're like a walking corpse."

"I was born with it. I get that all the time."

Shaking away from Aya, I went back out into the rain.

I continued the search until dawn, but I never found Hajikano.

I headed home, passing by grade-schoolers headed to radio calisthenics. Once home, before even taking off my wet clothes, fully aware of the absurd hour, I called Chigusa's house. I wanted to know the rest of the conversation that got cut short. I had hundreds of questions. But there were only ten dial tones, and no answer. Was nobody up yet? Or had they already gone out?

I gave up and put down the receiver. I undressed, took a shower, and soaked in the warm bathtub for a long time. My head was empty. After getting out, I put on pajamas, ate the cold rice left in the rice cooker, carefully and time-consumingly brushed my teeth, and lay down on my futon. I thought I could never sleep in this dangling situation, but I lost consciousness in a blink and slept like a pile of bricks for five hours.

A sharp beam of light came through the curtains and woke me. In sharp contrast to yesterday, the weather was clear and pleasing. My head ached like I still needed three more hours of sleep, but I gave up and sat up from my futon. I felt like it had all been a bad dream, yet simultaneously knew it was reality. I went downstairs to

the phone, called Hajikano's house, and Aya answered at the second dial tone.

"I was literally just about to call you," she said with surprise.

"Does that mean there was a development?"

"Yeah." Aya's voice sounded worn out. "...For now, the worst was avoided. Yui was found alive."

I sighed with relief and collapsed to the floor.

But Aya's phrasing wasn't entirely reassuring. Like she had good news and bad news, and had only told me the good news.

"The worst was avoided... but even so, something bad did happen. Is that right?"

"That's right," Aya affirmed. "Our bad premonition was right. At early dawn, Yui threw herself into the raging sea."

I let out a gasp. The sea. I'd completely overlooked it. Why didn't I search there? Maybe her first attempt had left such an impression on me, I was sure she would choose hanging again. And maybe the beach was too familiar a place to me.

"There's no way to describe it other than a miracle. It seems a lucky wave pushed her back to shore. She was found early in the morning by an old couple taking a walk on the coast. They called 119 right away, and the wife had lifeguard training, so she was able to provide aid before the ambulance arrived. Yui's only just regained consciousness, so she's in a state of deep confusion. But she can talk, so there didn't seem to be any serious brain damage. ...They just say we can't meet her for a while. Her family, that is, so it'd be even harder for you, Yocchan."

I listened to her with bated breath. I wasn't even sure how I should be feeling. Should I be glad Hajikano's okay, saddened about her suicide attempt, or grateful for the luck?

“What are you going to do now, Miss Aya?”

“I just talked with our parents about that. We decided once Yui’s out of the hospital, she should go to her grandma’s house to recuperate. She’d be able to live cut off from the outside world for a while.”

“I see. ...That may be for the best.”

Aya spoke to me comfortingly. “Hey, Yocchan, I think you did good. As harshly as your old friend Yui rejected you, it didn’t get you down. In fact, you didn’t try to force things along, but kept patiently persuading Yui from a reasonable distance. That took your relationship as far as her going out with you every night. Not only that, but you succeeded at getting Yui friends. Seeing it happen up close, I was convinced it was a task only you could do, Yocchan. In other words, no matter how hard anyone tried, it was impossible to cure her self-destructive desires. Maybe that’s all there is to it.”

“Thank you very much,” I said, but then knew I had to append, “And I’m sorry.”

“I told you, there’s nothing to apologize for,” Aya laughed haggardly.

Once the call was over, I called Chigusa without delay. I had to question her about her detailed knowledge of my bet.

A theory had formed in my head, perhaps while I was sleeping, about why information about the bet had reached Chigusa.

Chigusa Ogiue had experienced this bizarre bet.

Let’s say the woman on the phone proposed a bet to more than just me. It could be just a few people, or it could be hundreds, but say there were others who she offered bets to, and Chigusa was one of them. And Chigusa was able to win - or perhaps not win, but

by some means make it through the bet - and successfully survived. As a result, she noticed her classmate Yosuke Fukamachi was taking on a bet like she once had. Also, she knew a loophole in the bet.

Out of all the theories I could extract from the facts that had come to light, none seemed more plausible than this one. Of course, it was possible I was overlooking something serious. But even so, the theory that Chigusa had been through the bet had a unique sticking power.

“Hello?” Chigusa answered the phone. “Fukamachi, I assume?”

“Right. Hajikano was found. She jumped into the sea in the early hours. Luckily, she didn’t die, but it’ll be hard to meet with her for a while.”

“I see,” Chigusa said, and nothing more. She didn’t seem to have any more thoughts on the matter. She was as calm as if she expected it to happen from the start.

“I want to carry on with our conversation from yesterday.”

“Then come to my house, please. It could be a long one. And there is something I want to show you.”

“Something to show me?”

“It would help to come as soon as possible. There does not seem to be much time left.”

With that, Chigusa ended the call.

Not much time?

I twisted my neck. What was she talking about? Was what she wanted to show me something that would go away with time?

In any event, I obeyed and headed for her house.

Many things were approaching an end. There were dead cicadas lying on the road here and there. Ants swarmed on the dried corpses, and from a distance it looked like the ground itself

was squirming.

Tsukutsuku-boushi had come to make up the majority of the cicada buzzing; the close of summer drew near. The hot days would surely continue for a while. But no more escalation than this. It was only downhill from here.

Entering the complex, hilly residential district, after a while, I reached Chigusa's house. Washing hung up on the second-floor veranda blew pleasantly in the wind.

Just as I stood at the door to ring the doorbell, I was called for from the garden.

"Over here."

I turned to the voice and stepped onto the neatly-cut lawn.

Chigusa was waiting for me there.

Seeing her there, sitting in a wheelchair, instantly melted a number of my doubts.

"Say, Fukamachi. I want to go to the beach," she said, tilting her head slightly.

There was a small white flower at her feet.

*

At the beginning of summer in third grade was the first time I experienced life in a hospital.

Then, too, it was my legs which were injured. While going down the hill to the shore on my bike, I wanted to see how far I could go without using the brakes. Just as I made it to the end of the hill and thought "Alright, I made it!", the front wheel hit a bump and my body was thrown through the air. Since I turned the handlebars just before, I avoided landing face-first, but my left knee

hit the asphalt hard instead.

At the first hospital I visited, it was diagnosed as a bruise, but the pain was so great I couldn't walk or even bend my knee. At a separate hospital, they found it to be a broken kneecap that would take two months to heal. Since that was my first major injury, I remember my mother being more flustered than I was.

These days, I was able to even enjoy living in the hospital, but being in third grade and having never been hospitalized before, a single day spent lying in bed felt like an eternity. At first, I had no idea how to spend my time, and just went mad from boredom. It felt like time had been stopped for me. My three meals a day were my only stimulation and pleasure. There was lots of plain food - pickled food, syrupy boiled food, soup with weak flavor, fish with no fat meat. But occasionally there was food with condiments like sauce and ketchup, and that alone made me feel fulfilled for a few hours.

My dad bought me books from many fields to stave off my boredom. I had no habit of reading back then, and was the sort of kid who barely looked at any books, not even illustrated encyclopedias. But having nothing else to do, I had to read those books. Not thinking about if it was interesting or not, worthwhile or not, I just followed the words in front of me and stared at the photos and illustrations. Doing that, I gradually found no small amount of enjoyment there.

One book I read again and again was a book explaining magic tricks. Like the stuff you see on TV: getting the number right for a card pulled at random, making a coin vanish into a cup, making a wand levitate in midair. It explained in detail how all those tricks were set up and performed.

It was a complex and difficult subject, but the author, who was a magician, had an extremely smooth and easy-to-read style, and I read it like I was learning about the other side of the world. Thinking about it now, rather than the secrets to the magic tricks themselves, what I really enjoyed was probably the author's perspective on the psychological blind spots of the people who witnessed them. Most people's first experience as a reader is with novels or essays, but I learned the joy of reading from a book on magic tricks.

If my father had given me books on astronomy at the time, maybe I would have ended up as an astronomy fanatic like Hinohara? No, I got bored of magic tricks after a month or two, so maybe the same thing would have happened with astronomy. At any rate, making such theories was pointless. A life where Yosuke Fukamachi came to like stars and the life Yosuke Fukamachi had lived now were entirely separate things. Maybe he couldn't have loved Hajikano even then.

The room I stayed in had four other children in all. There were three boys and one girl. Their injuries were in different areas, but they were all serious ones.

The girl in the bed in front of me seemed to have broken a leg like me, as one of her legs was wrapped up in a cast. The thinness of her uninjured leg and the thickness of the multi-layered cast felt as unbalanced as a crab's pincers. I wasn't sure if she was depressed about being in the hospital or if she had a gloomy personality to begin with, but she always had a glum look. Of course, I've never seen a long-term patient in a hospital who was all smiles.

Once every three or four days, the girl's mother paid a visit. It

wasn't all that infrequent. Yet every time, without exception, within ten minutes she'd say "Well, your mother's busy" and leave early, which only seemed to spur the girl's loneliness. When her mother came to visit, she set out to make the most of those ten minutes, complaining about her every dissatisfaction to get across the hardship of her hospitalization. Her mother, exhausted from work, let it pass through her ears with a fed-up expression, then left with the excuse of being busy. It was probably an undeniable fact that she was busy with work, but I had to wonder if it was better to just not visit at all at that point.

Once her mother left, the girl would bury herself in her pillow and sob. I got melancholy seeing the series of events unfold. Why couldn't things go any better than that? Why couldn't they be more honest? You don't want to quarrel either, do you? I loathed her clumsiness - but now, I think that irritation came from the awareness that I had the same sort of clumsiness.

I hated the crybaby girl, but she hated me too. She seemed annoyed by how my mother would visit frequently and stay for a while. Every time she came and replaced the flowers or doodled on my cast, the girl glared scornfully. After the visit ended and I was alone, she spent a long time glaring at me. Like saying "don't ever forget this glare."

Only someone who's been through it will really get it, but people in the hospital with broken legs taste all kinds of discomfort and misery. To take it to an extreme, they lose some of their dignity as people and are attacked by extraordinary powerlessness. Maybe she and I both kept our vitality by hating those nearby, so we could fight that powerlessness.

The girl and I formed a cease-fire a month after I entered the hospital. I was reading a book in bed like usual, and heard a festival band from the dark outside the window.

Holding my injured leg, I slowly stood up on the other leg to look out the window. Dozens of people were walking down the road in the same direction. Many had family along with them, but there were plenty of students in uniform who seemed to be coming home from school. There was no small number of kids about my age. And they were all laughing together.

While watching the people going down the street, I spotted a few of my classmates. I impulsively wanted to call out to them, but rethought it just before I did. Maybe having a conversation with them could temporarily soothe my loneliness. But the moment they saw me at a hospital window as they headed to a festival, it would shift the clear boundary between me and them - so I felt.

No, the boundary was already being pulled, I thought. I was just ignorant of its existence before now. There was already an unrecoverable distance between me and everyone at school. While I lay in bed and counted stains on the ceiling, they were spending irreplaceable time with friends, making many precious memories.

I alone felt like I'd been completely left behind by the world. Before I knew it, tears filled my eyes. I hurried to rub them before any spilled out. I sat on my bed, took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and waited for my tear glands to settle down.

Suddenly, I heard a sobbing voice very close by. It didn't seem likely I had let out a sob without even realizing. I opened my eyes and saw the girl leaning from her bed to look out the window.

Her cheeks were wet with tears.

She must be feeling a similar lonesomeness as me, I realized.

I think I sought to console her then because I knew, in a roundabout way, it would give me consolation too. In essence... it's hard to soothe your own sorrow, but not so hard to soothe someone else with similar sorrows. And once you prove their similar sorrows can be soothed, it's simple to do it with your own.

I took a handkerchief from the bedside table, plucked a small white flower from the vase on the table, and folded it to a suitable length. Once prepared, I carefully stood up on one leg and called to the girl.

She hurried to wipe her tears and looked at me. I extended my palms to show her I wasn't holding anything. She stared, looked between my hands and face, and asked with a slight sob, "What is it?"

"What do you think?", I asked back, and loosened my face up to lower her guard. I'm sure it was a horribly awkward smile. "You'll see soon."

I put the handkerchief on my left hand, stroked it with my right, then pulled it away and offered the white flower that appeared to the girl. Her eyes widened and she blinked a few times. She timidly took the flower with both hands and inspected it from various angles. Once sure it was real rather than artificial, she lovingly put it in the small vase at her bedside. Then she turned back to me and smiled with a face swelled from tears.

Ever since then, once per day, I would perform a magic trick I'd practiced that day for the girl. After dinner was over, she'd beckon to me and politely put her hands on her knees, waiting for my show to begin. I'd walk over on one leg to her bed and sit in the chair there, then perform the trick I'd desperately practiced in secret all

day as if I was very familiar with it. Regardless of the outcome of the trick, she gave a small round of applause.

Eventually, we came to converse without any magic tricks involved. It was mostly trivial stuff like the food being good, or how we didn't like the way the nurse wrapped bandages.

Just one time, the girl mentioned my birthmark.

"That bruise really doesn't want to heal, it seems."

"Oh, this?" I lightly touched where the birthmark was. "I've had this since I was born. It's not an injury."

"Born with it...", she said curiously, staring at it. "It doesn't hurt or itch or anything, does it?"

"Nah, not at all."

"Good." She smiled with relief.

And also... Just one time, she had a complaint.

"If you had to live your whole life in a wheelchair, what would you do?"

She asked me this as I was headed back to bed, after cleaning up from a magic trick.

I grabbed the windowsill and stopped, thinking about what she said.

"I don't know. I've never thought about it. Why do you ask?"

The girl hung her head and wore a hollow smile. "Because it seems I may have to."

"Did a doctor tell you that?"

"Yes. They said quite some time ago that the possibility wasn't zero. At the very least, they said, some nerve paralysis would remain."

I spent a while thinking about my reply.

"If it were me, I'd probably cry a ton. I'd keep crying for days

and days, and take it out on my mom, the nurse, and you, and ask for selfish things. I think if I was gonna be unable to walk for life, I could be forgiven for that much."

The girl said "That's true," and nodded repeatedly. As if her agreement was deepening each time she nodded. Then she looked up with a sudden thought, grabbed my sleeve, and sat me on the bed. Slowly lifting up her cast-covered leg with both hands to re-adjust her position, she held me from behind, dug her face into my back, and cried.

I think even at the time, I had a gut understanding of what her "selfishness" was. So I didn't say anything and accepted it. She cried for a long time. Like she was getting out all the water in her body. I wasn't even ten and didn't know what words I should say to her, so I stayed silent. Even though I was sixteen now, I still couldn't tell you what words I should have said.

When I left the hospital, the girl said "I'll come meet you when my leg heals" and asked for my address and phone number. I wanted to ask the same of her, but figured I could ask her when she called me. And I'll have to learn a bunch of magic tricks by then, I also thought.

I was more optimistic in third grade than you'd ever believe looking at me now.

A month, two months went by after I left, and I heard no word from the girl. Half a year passed, and not a single call.

After a year went by, I came to realize I would probably never meet her again. She hadn't broken her promise. In other words, her leg never healed.

Gradually, I forgot about her. Her presence within me grew

weaker by the day, reaching the point where I might think “Oh yeah, there was that girl” when passing in front of a large hospital. Soon even that was gone, I forgot her face and name, and the brief summer memories I spent with her were buried deep in my mind.

*

That hill to the beach I had ridden my bike down that day, I was now pushing a wheelchair down. The rusty guardrails along the path had vines curled around them in places. Thousands of cicadas buzzed from the thickets on either side, making it as noisy as the inside of a clockwork toy.

“Did you leave the hospital right after I did, Ogiue?”, I asked.

“It couldn’t be right after, I’m afraid,” Chigusa said, looking straight ahead at the distant sea. “I returned to school nearly half a year after you left the hospital. By then, my classmates had completely forgotten about me. For children that age, half a year is plenty to forget about a girl’s entire existence. Of course, I never did have much presence.”

“But there wasn’t that sort of “transfer student” interest either?”

“Indeed, not at all.” Chigusa weakly smiled. “Once I was wheelchair-bound, my avenues for friendship were greatly limited. It wasn’t quite that I was discriminated against for being handicapped. Luckily, Mitsuba Elementary School did have instructors familiar with that. ...However, even with little discrimination, the simple fact that I could not walk couldn’t be changed. People’s actions when they were with me were limited. I couldn’t participate in any athletic play, and my wheelchair had to

be carried every time there was the smallest step. The girls there did not hate me, but deeply hated the trouble that came along with interacting with me. At first, they found it curious and escorted me around, enthralled with the idea of looking after someone disabled. But given a week, the bother won out, and they came to blatantly avoid me. People naturally distanced themselves."

I could easily imagine that process. There was a girl in a wheelchair at my middle school, and while not hated, she was avoided. I remembered her always in the corner of class, desperately trying to keep up with a group of quiet girls in the culture club.

"Previously, I described myself in middle school as "could be liked by anyone, but could not be anyone's favorite." But that was a bald-faced lie. I told such lies wanting to be thought of as a normal person. The real me was not only not liked by anyone, but estranged no matter where I was. I thought a hundred times each day, "I'm someone who shouldn't be here." At such times, I often recalled days spent with a certain boy with a large birthmark on his face to soothe my heart. That was a symbol of happiness to me. It was my sole proof that one could have wonderful memories no matter how restricted one was. And... that is why I never contacted you, Fukamachi. If you also refused me, the sole thing I was holding onto would vanish. ...However, after entering Minagisa First High, I discovered that name on the class roster."

Chigusa twisted around to look at my face.

"Indeed, the name "Yosuke Fukamachi" was there. I would be lying to say I wasn't happy. It was like a dream to end up in the same high school classroom as my first love. But more than that, I feared reuniting with you. You would not necessarily accept me

now as you did then. Even if we could return to a cordial relationship like before, I could not hope for any further development. Since to a boy of sixteen, a girl in a wheelchair is in many ways inconvenient as a lover."

She turned forward again and stroked her legs with her hand.

"If only I could move these legs, I thought. I didn't have to be able to run around freely; just to walk alongside others. I wanted to have an average love of my own. ...Three months later, at school and after class, I heard a public phone ring. It was exactly fifty days ago."

At the end of the downward slope, the thickets on the side came to an end, and the sea glittering in the sunlight appeared. Seagulls loitering around the breakwater hurriedly flew away when they saw us coming.

"The only ones surprised I could suddenly walk were the doctor and my family. All others had a reaction such as "Ah, your injury finally healed." Though a lifelong worry to the one affected, apparently that's how it seems to others. ...And upon meeting with you after ten years, it seemed you had completely forgotten me. Of course, I could have reminded you by only saying "the girl you were with in the hospital," but I decided against it. I thought we might as well start from scratch. Forgetting my miserable past self, and living as an average girl."

Once at the edge of the breakwater, we silently listened to the waves for a while. Past the sea, there were thick clouds seeming to touch the top of the sky.

"Say, Fukamachi," Chigusa spoke. "If the girl sitting next to you that day were in a wheelchair, do you think you wouldn't have been this friendly?"

“Nah,” I shook my head. “Instead of walking along with you, I’d be pushing your wheelchair like today. That’d be the only difference.”

Chigusa smiled happily.

“...Perhaps I shouldn’t have gone along with any bet, and it would have sufficed to simply say “I’m the girl from the hospital room.””

“Maybe,” I nodded.

“But if I had, I wouldn’t have gotten to run around town with you, and sneak into the pool, so perhaps it was the right choice.” She put her arms together and stretched. “...But I wish I could have shown up to the festival. I did practice reading with you, even.”

Remembering something, Chigusa dug into her pocket and handed me a letter.

“I’ve written what you want to know here. Read it later.”

I thanked her and put the letter in my pocket.

After that, we talked at length about all that had happened this summer. Chigusa waking me up as I slept in my first day in class. Her guiding me around the school. Having Chigusa eat cup ramen when she said she’d never had it in her life. The various bad deeds we did to make her a bad person. Swimming nude in the pool. Sneaking out of the house at night, and the four of us seeing innumerable comets together.

Once we were out of things to say, Chigusa suddenly looked to the sky and pointed straight above. “Fukamachi, look.”

A white jet stream drew a line in the sky.

We watched it in fascination for a long time.

When I looked back, Chigusa was gone.

Only a wheelchair without its owner was left behind.

I looked at my feet. White froth from the waves floated on the water.

I sat on the edge of the breakwater, and watched intently as the froth soundlessly dissolved into the sea.

I'll soon go the same way as her, I thought.

Chapter 9: Someone Else's Name

The next day, Hinohara visited my house. He rang the doorbell several times with ten-second gaps, and while I did hear the sound of it, I had trouble hearing it as the doorbell, so it took me a while to notice my guest.

I slowly rose from bed, left my dark closed-curtains room, and went down the stairs while the light dazed me. I knew from his way of ringing the doorbell that my guest was Hinohara. It wasn't uncommon for him to visit me in person without notice. Perhaps he'd quickly noticed what had happened to Hajikano, or Chigusa, or maybe both.

I opened the door and Hinohara drew close to me. Unusual for him, his face was full of concern and haste.

"How much do you know?", he asked me.

"It'd be probably faster if you started." I went past him and sat on the front steps outside. "How much do *you* know?"

Hinohara glared at me for a while like he wanted to say something, but eventually his shoulders drooped and he sat beside me.

"I got a call from Chigusa at noon yesterday." He took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it restlessly. "We'd traded numbers, but it was the first time she called me. I was surprised, and asked "What's wrong?" Then Chigusa said, "Are you listening, Hinohara? Listen closely to what I'm about to say." I didn't know what that was about, but I said sure."

Noon must have been before I arrived at Chigusa's house. So she'd not only left me a letter, but left a message with Hinohara in the form of a phone call.

Hinohara continued. “It was short, but I couldn’t parse it at all. “A number of strange things may happen from here on. But please, do not blame anyone,” Chigusa said. “Is that it?”, I asked. “That’s it,” she said. Right after that, she hung up. It was curious, alright, but the weather was good for stargazing yesterday, so I figured I could ask her in person later.”

“Strange things...”, I repeated. “Ogiue said that?”

“Yeah, that was it, word for word. And last night, I was the only one at the hotel. Was that the “strange thing” Chigusa was talking about?, I wondered. But that didn’t seem right to me. I felt like Chigusa would’ve described an occurrence like this some other way, not “a strange thing.” So I considered, maybe the other three not showing up was just an influence of “strange things” that had already gone down?”

“So you called Ogiue.”

“Yeah. I called her house right at noon today, but nobody answered. I was getting a bad feeling, so I kept calling with some time between each call. In the evening, somebody finally picked up. Seemed to be Chigusa’s mother. I asked if she was there, and got an incoherent reply. Like she was really bewildered. I immediately sensed something real bad had happened. I told her I was a close friend of Chigusa’s, and all of a sudden she cried like a dam burst. And she told me Chigusa drowned this morning.”

“Drowned?”, I repeated instinctively. Chigusa had surely turned to seafoam and vanished with me right there. But to know the cause of death for sure, they must have found her body. “Where did they...?”

“She washed up on the coast in a neighboring town. They called an ambulance right away, but it was already too late.

Chigusa's mom had to go through some formalities for her daughter dying in an accident, and I guess she was getting the necessary stuff when I called. I was so shocked, I couldn't even give condolences. Chigusa was dead? It was a little hard to believe. But at the same time, I knew deep down... so this was the "strange thing.""

Once Hinohara finished his first cigarette, he promptly lit up another. Like he was trying to cover up his emotions with smoke.

"I had to think Chigusa knew about her coming death. Which led to the possibility her death wasn't an accident, but a suicide. But I couldn't think of any reason why Chigusa would have to die. Sure, there was no hope for the love she had, it wasn't going to be repaid, but she wasn't a girl who would kill herself over that. All of a sudden, it occurred to me you might know something, so I called, but you weren't at home. So next, I called Hajikano's house."

As soon as he uttered the name Hajikano, his mostly-level tone began to waver. More than being sad, it seemed he was incredibly angry about something.

"Hajikano's mother answered the phone. I asked if Hajikano was there, and again got a vague, inarticulate answer. Like with Chigusa, I told her I was a close friend of Hajikano's, but her mom was deeply cautious. After a long line of questioning, the phone suddenly got handed to a young woman. I think it was Hajikano's older sister. She asked me some questions to make sure I really was a friend. Once she knew I wasn't lying, she apologized for doubting me, then explained what happened to Hajikano."

Hinohara stopped there, seeming to observe my reaction.

"It was a different time and different place, but Hajikano had a drowning incident similar to Chigusa's," I said in his place. "Right?"

"What the hell is happening?" Hinohara dropped his cigarette

underfoot and squished it against the ground. “You know something, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t have any more info than that.”

“But you at least have some ideas?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “Listen, Hinohara. I’m sorry, but give me some time alone. I still haven’t accepted everything, and I need to sort things out. If I come up with anything, I’ll contact you. So can you leave for now?”

Hinohara watched carefully for slight changes in my expression, trying to probe into me. And perhaps seeing that there was what looked like real sadness there, he gave a resigned sigh.

“I’ll do what I can to look into the cause of the two accidents. I’ll keep digging until I find an answer I’m satisfied with. And if I find out Chigusa’s death wasn’t an accident, but somebody else’s doing, I’m gonna find the culprit and beat them to a pulp. I’m willing to put them through the same as Chigusa, depending.”

Hinohara stood up and kicked the cigarette butt into the gutter.

“Call me if you change your mind. See you.”

“Right, got it.”

After Hinohara left, I went back to my room and lay on my futon. Being told the official truth about Chigusa’s death, I felt a sense of loss like somebody’d secretly shaved away a portion of my body.

I told Hinohara “I don’t have any more info than that.” Obviously, that was a lie. I at least knew in detail the reality of Chigusa’s death. More than that, depending on your point of view, I essentially killed her.

And in the letter Chigusa left me with, there was information

about the “sin” Hajikano was trying to atone for. What happened in those blank four days. Chigusa looked into it herself for me, and arrived at what she thought to be the truth.

“I suppose I should have told you all this earlier, Fukamachi,” she wrote. “But I was afraid of being seen as a disagreeable girl trying to eliminate her competition, so I kept silent. I’m sorry.”

When I read that, I felt I had a gut understanding of why Hajikano had to kill herself at this particular time.

Perhaps Hajikano enjoyed those stargazing days more than anyone.

And that’s why she felt she couldn’t be the only one to keep on living.

*

I stood at the bathroom mirror, uncapped the marker, and marked under my eye. Even looking at it closely in the mirror, the black spot fit very naturally on my skin. A stranger would surely think it was a real crying mole.

Two days had passed since Hinohara visited my house. In that time, I’d stayed up in my room with the curtains closed, questioning myself about this and that. Should I have not led Hajikano out of her room? Was it my meddling which led Hajikano to attempt suicide again? Was there really no way to save Chigusa? If I had given up on Hajikano sooner, could I at least save Chigusa’s life? Was it none other than me who led things to this worst conclusion?... Once I got thinking, I couldn’t stop. I felt like everything I had done completely missed the mark.

Lying in my futon and staring at the ceiling all day, I gained an

understanding of why Hajikano stayed in her dim room. Once you're caught in a vortex of regret, your mind becomes dominated with the powerlessness of thinking anything you do will only worsen the situation, and even leaving your room becomes an ordeal. And sometimes, a vague longing for death comes upon you. Like being under some kind of curse.

The cicadas were still ever-present outside the window, but had lessened compared to a week ago. The setting of the sun somehow seemed to have gotten much faster, too. Hot days were hot days, but I'd never experienced such unbearably hot days as the last ten or so.

Which would come first: the end of summer, or my death? If possible, I wanted to leave this world before summer ended. Before the cumulonimbus clouds departed, before the cicadas went away, before the sunflowers wilted. The most lonely thing was always being the last to leave.

The morning of the 20th, I got a call. I had started to find even eating troublesome, but the instant I heard the phone ring, my body moved naturally. I guess my body still hadn't forgotten the joy of when I was on the line with Hajikano.

The caller was Hinohara.

"I've been running around everywhere for four days," he said. "But thanks to that, I've got a general idea of things."

"A general idea?", I repeated, thinking there was surely no way he'd figured out everything, down to the bets with the woman on the phone, in just four days.

"Yeah. I mostly get why the two of them fell into the sea. I went fishing around in Chigusa and Hajikano's history."

“What? How?”

“First, Chigusa,” he continued, ignoring my question. “There was nothing clearly amiss in her history. She never had disputes with others, and seemed to live a calm life. The one exception was that from elementary school up to very recently, she was in a wheelchair. She damaged her vertebrae in an accident and couldn’t stand for long periods, but recently was finally able to walk again.”

“Well,” I prodded, “what about Hajikano?”

“Just the opposite,” he said like reading bad news. “I went around asking former classmates of Hajikano’s, and they all told me the same thing. “She wasn’t always like that.” “She was honest, cheerful, liked by everyone.” It seems most attributed that change to the birthmark that appeared on her face in winter, second year of middle school. Her personality gradually changed after that, and she was like a different person half a year later. That was the general consensus. ...But some had different ideas. In summer of her third year, Hajikano had a four-day absence from school without any warning. And those four days marked when honest, cheerful, liked-by-all Hajikano turned into the silent and gloomy girl of today... That was their view.”

Through the phone, I heard him sitting down on a sofa.

“Logically, the former is more reasonable. People’s personalities don’t change in four or five days. But for some reason, I felt like those blank four days were the key to answering my doubts. ...To get to the point, my hunch was right. Hajikano was absent just before summer break started, around July 12th. I went checking up on what happened to Hajikano within that timeframe. Expanding my scope from her class, to her year, to her whole school, I came upon a curious incident. It happened in a neighboring

town, on the second day of those four blank days. On that day, the charred corpses of two middle school girls were found in some ruins in the mountains. The news said it was suicide, with a definite note left behind."

Struck with admiration for his detective skills, I spoke. "I remember that. It made the news, even got mentioned at a school assembly."

"Yeah, it was a well-known incident around here. But at the time, I couldn't see any common points between the two dead girls and Hajikano. But I had an unusual conviction. It was absolutely no coincidence that their deaths and Hajikano's blank four days overlapped. As I kept digging, sure enough, I found the thread connecting them to Hajikano. The three of them were in the same class for one year in elementary school. ...Now, here's where I made a slightly crazy leap. What if the gruesome suicide by fire in the ruins wasn't planned for two people, *but for three?* What if there was meant to be three charred corpses instead of two, but one of them ran away?"

I had no words.

...Had Hinohara really gotten this far in just four days?

He went on. "It was an interesting theory, but too much of a leap of logic. I didn't have a shred of proof. If I knew what the suicide note said, the truth would be clear, but unfortunately I don't have those kinds of connections. Just as I was giving up, I got a call from a friend who heard I was questioning Mitsuba Middle School students. Turned out he knew a teacher at the school. He told me I could meet him anytime if I was interested.

"So the next day, I went to meet that teacher, and told him my ridiculous theory with deadly seriousness. I thought he'd deny it out

of the gate. But once I was done, the teacher put his fingers to his brow and rubbed it, then said this. “You won’t hear anything from me, but it wouldn’t be strange if that happened.” ...Don’t you think that’s odd? Shouldn’t you normally imply denial after you say “you won’t hear anything from me”?”

“There’s nothing odd about it,” I said. “In short, you’re saying your idea was right?”

Hearing my stifled laugh, Hinohara got annoyed. “What’s so funny?”

“No, I’m not laughing at you, Hinohara. It’s just too funny that you arrived at a truth I couldn’t reach after a month in just four days.”

Hinohara gulped. “I knew it. You knew all this?”

“Yeah. Though I only knew the reason for Hajikano’s suicide after she jumped into the sea, so it was all too late anyway.”

What Hinohara was telling me was largely the same as what Chigusa wrote in her letter. Their approach to the mystery and thought processes had some overlap, and their conclusion was exactly the same. The two separate lines of logic filled in each other’s holes, and it seemed there was no more room for doubt: Hajikano was involved in the suicide of those two middle school girls from the neighboring town.

I stopped laughing and collected my breath. “Hey, Hinohara. I don’t know when, but I’ll be able to meet Hajikano in the hospital soon. When that happens, will you come with me? She’s fond of you.”

“Sorry, but I can’t do that,” he coldly refused. “I’m still not certain about the connection between Chigusa’s illogical death and Hajikano’s suicide attempt. But there’s one thing I can say. For

some reason, whenever Hajikano tries to die, she doesn't, but people around her do. ...Or maybe my theory that Hajikano led Chigusa to suicide is wrong. And the cause behind her death is somewhere completely different, and I'm over here just making up conspiracies. But at any rate, three people who were deeply connected to Hajikano are dead. That's an undeniable fact."

He paused a few seconds, like giving his words time to sink in.

"I want absolutely no involvement with her anymore. You better watch it too, Fukamachi. Or else you might just be number four. ...And now that Chigusa's gone, I have no reason left to go to that rooftop. Our stargazing days are over. Goodbye."

The call ended.

I put down the receiver, returned to my dark room, and lay down on the futon once more. I spotted the telescope case lying in the corner of the room. The day we saw the Perseid Meteor Shower, Hinohara said "I completely forgot a telescope would only get in the way," and had me keep it at my place. Though for a time he didn't even let me touch the telescope, lately he could tell how passionately I was studying stargazing, to the point that he'd even let me hold onto it.

The telescope I had done everything to get for Hajikano's sake. Now I got fed up even looking at it. It was a symbol of my failure, a symbol of defeat. These past few days, I had tried to avoid even letting the telescope enter my sight, but I felt its presence in the corner even if I wasn't looking directly at it. I should really return it to Hinohara already, I thought.

I lifted my heavy body, picked up the case containing the lens tube and tripod, and left the house. The sun was still shining, but its rays felt weak; none of that scorching, skin-burning sensation. The

road was dirty with mud dropped by a tractor. Maybe from a barbecue, the lukewarm smell of burning sausage was carried on the wind.

As I tightly re-gripped the telescope case so as not to drop it and started walking, a familiar blue car stopped in front of my house. Masafumi appeared from the driver's seat. From what I could tell, it wasn't like he just happened to see me and stopped the car.

"Aya's calling for you," Masafumi said, and pointed to the passenger seat. "Get in."

I nodded and got in the car.

*

"Just to let you know, it'd be a waste of time asking me the situation."

Masafumi picked out a cigarette butt with relatively more leaf left from a tray packed with them like sunflower seeds, put it in his mouth, and lit it with a cigarette lighter. Then his face scrunched up like it was disgusting, and he breathed out the smoke.

"Aya just asked me to come get you, so I have not a clue about any details. She's waiting at the hospital, so ask her anything there you want to ask there. All I was told is that her sister is in the hospital, and she's open for visiting as of today."

"In other words, Aya wants me to meet with Hajikano - er, her sister?", I asked half-believing.

"I told you, I dunno," Masafumi said unhappily with the cigarette still in his mouth. "Maybe Aya just has to stay near the

hospital, y'know?"

I nodded. He was right. The possibility existed that Aya just wanted to talk to me, but had to look after Hajikano at the hospital, so she asked Masafumi to bring me to her.

After the top of a narrow, winding hill was a tiny local hospital surrounded by thick forest. Masafumi dropped me off at the rotary, said "I've got tons to do back at the lab, so find your own way home," and drove off in a hurry. I looked around for Aya, but didn't spot her. Figuring it was safer to wait here rather than run around searching, I sat on the planter in front with the telescope case on my lap and waited.

A large river ran in front of the hospital. The riverbed was covered with plants as tall as people, and it wasn't clear how much was ground and how much was river. The thick vegetation even spread deep into the side of the road on the bank, and it really didn't seem to be in any state for people to walk on. Past the river, I could see dense green mountains, and a few steel towers rose from the foot of the mountains up to the middle. While waiting for Aya, I gazed absentmindedly at the peaceful scenery without any particular focus.

After some time, Aya appeared from the front entrance. She had a worn T-shirt and a denim skirt with frayed edges. Her makeup was messy, as was her hair, and she looked like she'd aged three years since we last met.

"Sorry to call you all of a sudden." Aya gave me an exhausted smile. "I'll have to give Masafumi some compensation later too. ...Well, let's go."

"Hold on a moment," I hurriedly stopped her. "Are you taking me to meet Yui?"

“Well, obviously. Or is there someone else in the hospital you know?”

“Nothing like that. But I felt that me meeting Yui right now would have an adverse effect. Have you told her that I’m coming?”

“I haven’t. But relax, it’s fine.” She smiled at me, but her eyes were hollow. “Yui seems more peaceful than she’s been in years. Just -”

Her words cut off there as she seemed to reconsider something.

“...No, you should meet her in person instead of me explaining it.”

Going through the door, the unique hospital air of disinfectant and patient odor enveloped me. The fluorescent lights in the halls emitted a pale blue light, making the already-glum hospital interior even more uncomfortable. The linoleum floor was stained in places, and the old sofa in front of the reception desk was unspeakably shabby, showing signs of many repairs.

After receiving visitor passes at the front desk, Aya took me to the elevator and we went up to the fourth floor. Aya stopped in front of a room with the door left open and wordlessly pointed inside. I couldn’t see in from where I was standing, but the entrance had a plate with “Yui Hajikano” on it. There was space for three other plates, but they were all empty. So it was a four-person room, but only Hajikano was occupying it now.

I put my hand on my chest, took a deep breath, looked at the plate with Hajikano’s name again, and stepped resolutely into the hospital room.

There were beds in the four corners of the cramped room, and Hajikano was in the back-right bed from the door. She wore a pale

blue gown and was absorbed in what looked like a thick notebook, so she didn't seem to notice me there. What was she reading so passionately? I quietly walked over and peered at what was in her hands. I couldn't tell the contents, but I saw there were many short handwritten sentences.

Just then, Hajikano finally noticed my presence. She shook, quickly closed the notebook, and put it at her bedside as if to hide it from my sight.

When she made eye contact with me, she shyly bowed her head.

I felt an indescribable unease from that reaction.

"Hajikano." The voice I barely managed to squeeze out my throat felt like it wasn't my own. "Could you -"

"U-Um, sorry," Hajikano interrupted. "Before you talk, there's something I need to make sure of..."

She lowered her head and cowered pitifully, then slowly breathed in and spoke like she'd been thinking hard.

"What is your name?"

The color left my vision, and my ears rang so loud, it was as if they directly shook my consciousness.

As I stood there at a loss for words, Hajikano innocently spoke.

"...The place I'm in is a hospital room. What I'm sleeping in is a bed. Outside the window are keyaki trees, and the season is summer. I haven't lost any knowledge of that sort. As you can tell, I can clearly speak, too. But when I look in the mirror, I don't feel like I'm seeing myself in it. It's like I'm looking at an older relative."

It was clear to anyone that these were signs of memory loss - more specifically, retrograde amnesia. Perhaps it was an escape

reflex from her mental wounds. Or maybe memory damage from a lack of oxygen. But all that didn't matter.

My concern wasn't the cause of the memory loss, but the future it would bring about.

"So I don't know who you are, and what kind of relationship I had with you. I'm sorry to tell you this after you came and visited."

I knew very well that it was imprudent to be delighted about it.

But, potentially.

Maybe if her memory loss wasn't very temporary, and lasted for some time.

Could Yosuke Fukamachi get to start over with Yui Hajikano?

But those hopes were crushed by Hajikano's next words.

"Luckily, however, before I lost my memory, it seemed I wrote a diary every single day. It was in the luggage my sister brought me. That said, it's a very simple diary, really not much more than a list of events. ...Ah, and so I should mention, you don't need to hide the fact that my fall into the sea was a suicide attempt and not an accident."

Hajikano gave me a worry-free smile.

I looked to the notebook on her bedside. Thinking about it, I did recall that notebook. That day I entered Hajikano's room with Aya's forceful aid, it was open on the desk. Maybe she was writing in it right up until I arrived.

The fact that Hajikano kept a daily diary was surprising, at least to me. I thought she had long since lost interest in her own life. Does someone who's planning to commit suicide soon write in a diary every day? Or maybe she kept a diary *because* she was going to commit suicide?

Hajikano noticed my gaze and shifted to block the path

between me and the notebook.

“I’ve still only read the entries for the past few days, but it seems Yui Hajikano had a strong desire to kill herself. I still haven’t found any part explaining the cause of it, but she must have been troubled by this birthmark. Was memory loss the best escape from her desire to die? How miserable.”

She lifted her head, which had been lowered the whole time, and peered into my eyes from under her hair. “Er, so, I’d like to ask your name soon...”

“Don’t you already have a guess?”, I dodged, wanting to delay judgement by just a little more. “You read your diary, right?”

“Yes, as far as I’ve read, it seems the people who would come visit me are rather limited, so I do have a guess. I’m just not sure.”

Then suddenly, her eyes stopped on something hanging down from my hand.

“...Is that...”

Hajikano pointed at the telescope case.

“Are you perhaps Yuuya Hinohara?”

After a long hesitation, I slowly nodded.

The smile Hajikano gave me was a special kind, which she’d never given me before.

Ahh. This is how she smiles in front of Hinohara, I thought.

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After the long meeting was over and I left the room, Aya, who was seemingly sitting outside the whole time, stood up laboriously.

“Well done, Yocchan. Or should I say, Yuu-chan?”

I drew a deep sigh. “You heard everything?”

“I haven’t seen Yui enjoy herself so much in forever. What a clever idea, Yuuya Hinohara.”

We took the elevator down to the first floor, gave back our passes, and went outside. The sounds of higurashi and crows came from the trees around the hospital and overlapped each other. I checked the time table at the bus stop; it was twenty minutes until the next bus.

“...What should I do?”, I asked Aya. “I can’t possibly keep calling myself Yuuya Hinohara.”

“I want to confirm some things,” Aya said. “Is Yuuya Hinohara the guy who called me the other day, digging up this and that about Yui?”

“That’s right.”

“Judging from earlier, Yui seemed attached to him.”

“Yes. Before she lost her memory, Hinohara was the only one she had affection toward.”

“Only? Doesn’t she like you, Yocchan?”

“She doesn’t hate me, that’s all. But Hinohara was not only not hated, but actually liked.”

“Hmm.” Aya nodded vaguely. “So, why hasn’t Yuuya Hinohara made any contact since that call?”

I gave it some thought, then spoke. “Miss Aya, you were aware Yui and I were going to the rooftop of the ruined hotel to stargaze every night, yes?”

“Yeah. And Yuuya Hinohara was one of the people there, right?”

“Exactly. And there was another member of our stargazing

group, a girl named Chigusa Ogiue. The day after Yui's attempted suicide, she fell into the sea and died as if following after her. And Hinohara feels that Yui is responsible for Ogiue's death."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Aya twisted her neck. "Why would this Ogiue jump into the sea because Yui did?"

"While this is only within the realm of possibility...", I prefaced, then explained. "Last summer, there was an incident where two middle school girls in a neighboring town were found to have burned themselves to death. Hinohara suspects Yui's involvement in this incident. This is because, at just the same time, Yui was absent from school for four days straight without warning. And a number of her classmates say her personality changed drastically after those four days."

Aya pondered. "...In other words, Yui was the sole survivor of a group suicide, then went on to get Ogiue involved in something similar?"

I nodded with admiration. Her head worked fast, like only a sister of Hajikano's could.

"Of course, this is only something Hinohara thought up. I'm convinced that Yui's suicide attempt and Ogiue's death aren't directly related."

"I see." Aya closed her eyes in thought. "At any rate, this Hinohara guy decided to abandon Yui? So he's not going to visit."

"I believe you could reasonably assume that."

"And yet Yui doesn't know that. She still doesn't realize she's been abandoned by the one man she trusted in. After all, a man calling himself Yuuya Hinohara showed up."

My shoulders drooped. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told such a lie."

“Really? I thought it was a good idea, myself.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Of course. Or do you intend on going back to that room right now and saying, “Sorry, all that was a lie. I’m not Yuuya Hinohara, I’m Yosuke Fukamachi. Also, the real Yuuya Hinohara never wants to see you again”?” Aya laughed it up. “It’s fine. Yui seems really happy, and it’s advantageous for you, right, Yocchan? On the off chance you’re found out, if you offer a good explanation, well, maybe she won’t forgive you, but I think she’ll at least accept it.”

“I wonder about that.” I tilted my head. “Why did you have to give Yui the diary in the first place, Miss Aya? What merit is there to giving back her memories? Didn’t you consider that leaving her having forgotten everything would be happiest for her?”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right, Yocchan,” Aya admitted. “But I just wanted her to look back on her life from an objective standpoint. To look at herself like a third party and see what stupid ideas she was possessed by. ’Cause that’s something she can only do now, right?”

The bus arrived. I bowed my head to Aya and got on the steps.

“You’ll come visit again tomorrow, won’t you?”, she asked from behind.

I turned back. “What point is there in me visiting?”

“Um, Yocchan,” Aya said forcefully to be heard over the sound of the engine. “I didn’t call you here because I wanted someone to console Yui. Unfortunately, I’m not that good a sister. I just want to know how far one boy’s fairytale-y love can go in a heavy situation like this. I just want to see where that ends up.”

The driver warned me to hurry up since the door was closing. I went up the steps and sat in the nearest seat, and the bus departed right after.

I leaned back in the seat, closed my eyes, and looked back on every bit of the conversation we had. And I quietly became convinced that I would visit the hospital room again tomorrow. It was a hard invitation to resist. Even if I was fooling Hajikano, even if I was using a friend, I felt it would let me have a close relationship with her again like four years ago. Everything else became unimportant. Ultimately, just like Chigusa said, my true nature was that of a bad person.

The sun was setting as the bus arrived at my stop. While walking down the shopping district, I heard a phone ring like it had some distant day. It had been quite a while since I heard it. When was the last time I received a call from that woman? I think it was the second day of summer break, when she used The Little Mermaid as an example to explain the penalty for losing the bet.

“This is your first time using such means,” the woman said with surprise as I put the receiver to my ear. “I did not expect you assuming another person’s name to approach Hajikano. ...Not exactly fair, is it?”

“I don’t want to be lectured on fairness after you offered bets to me and Ogiue at the same time,” I replied. “No matter how things went down, one of us had to lose their bet, right?”

“If you did not want Ogiue to die, you should have loved her. You are the one who abandoned her,” the woman on the phone said, as if all responsibility lay on me. “Now... Fukamachi. I should warn you. Right now, to Hajikano, you are not Yosuke Fukamachi, but Yuuya Hinohara. Say your relationship advances, and there is a mutual love between you. Even so, who she would be loving is *Yuuya Hinohara, looking like you and talking like you*. I cannot recognize that as winning the bet.”

“Oh, I’m aware. I’m not pretending to be Hinohara because I want to win the bet. I’m just doing it because I want to.”

The woman spoke after some silence. “Is that a declaration that you do not care if you lose the bet?”

“Not necessarily. Of course I’m afraid to die. But for now, I’m happy to see Hajikano smile up close. To meet my end while I’m being distracted by that... surprisingly, it doesn’t sound so bad,” I said, then laughed to myself. “Well, I guess you wouldn’t get it.”

“Is that right,” the woman bluntly replied, but I felt her voice was a little more irritated than usual. “In any event, what you have done is in clear violation of the rules. As such, you will receive an appropriate penalty.”

“Penalty?”

“Henceforth, you are forbidden from revealing your true identity in front of Hajikano,” the woman informed me. “Since you have named yourself as Yuuya Hinohara, I will have you enforce it to the end.”

“Aha. *Selectively taking my voice when I give my name.* That makes things very Little Mermaid-esque,” I said distantly. “And it makes victory pretty desperate, huh?”

“For your information, you are the one who broke the rules,” the woman coldly remarked. “Well then, I look forward to August 31st, Yosuke Fukamachi wearing Yuuya Hinohara’s skin.”

I heard the call end. I put the receiver back and resumed walking down the shopping district.

And so I came to spend the remaining eleven days of summer break as Yuuya Hinohara.

Chapter 10: Don’t Lose Sight of Me

Back when Hajikano and I went home from school together, there were goldfish in the entryway of her house.

They were little wakin goldfish, which Hajikano won from a scooping game. The bowl was the size of a smallish watermelon, and the water was faintly blue, which made the green of the plants and the red of the goldfish show up better.

At the time, I wasn’t allowed to go into Hajikano’s house, but I remembered the contrast of those three colors with strange clarity. Maybe when Hajikano opened the door, I was embarrassed to look her in the eye, so my gaze always fled to the fishbowl in the back.

The three fish that were there in summer dwindled down to one fish by winter. As for the last one, he (or she) died just before a year had passed since my first visit to the house. That was pretty good for goldfish you won in a game, I thought. She must have cared for them well.

For whatever reason, Hajikano’s parents kept the empty fishbowl there. True, even without any fish in it, it was plenty beautiful in its own way; the light from the window hitting the bowl producing a blue shadow, the coontail slowly swaying in the water. But with the knowledge of the time when the goldfish were there, seeing the bowl lacking its red always put me in a melancholy mood.

Ever since, whenever there was something lonely or empty, that comparison came to mind. “Just like a fishbowl that’s lost its goldfish.”

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The next morning, I took the bus from the station to Minagisa Central Hospital. I pondered it briefly, but decided not to buy flowers. In my experience, there was no visiting gift quite as “what do I do with this?” as flowers.

The bus was full of old people, and I was the only young one. For a bus headed to a hospital, I found it odd how there were no passengers who seemed in poor health. But I doubted they were all visitors like me. In a book I read once, there was a scene where an old man is asked, “How are you feeling?”, and he jokingly replies, “If I were a little better, I might have to call a doctor.” Maybe it was something along those lines. The people riding this bus were those with the stamina left to get to the hospital themselves.

Once at the hospital, I didn’t go straight to the reception desk, but instead the smoking area on the outskirts of the parking lot. It was a prefab building with a glass sliding door which seemed to have been around for a long time, and the ceiling was yellowed as if painted with nicotine. After checking there was no one else there, I smoked two cigarettes, then slowly went around the hospital perimeter to calm myself. Once I got my visitor pass from the front desk, I took a deep breath and went up the elevator.

When I arrived in her hospital room, Hajikano was stooped over at the side of the bed, sorting her bag. She wasn’t in a hospital gown today, but rather a linen blouse and a neat light-lilac skirt. “Hajikano,” I called, and she swiftly turned around. “Hinohara.” Her eyes twinkled as she stood up. Yes, I couldn’t forget. Here, I was Yuuya Hinohara.

“So, you came again today.”

Hajikano bowed her head. It was an unimaginable response

from her prior to losing her memory. Like Hajikano from just after she got to know me.

"Yeah. How are you feeling?"

"Very healthy." She sat on the bed and smiled at me. "It's good you came in the morning. If you came at noon, we might have passed each other by."

"Passed by? Are you being let out already?"

"Yes. Just this morning, I was given permission to leave."

Weird, I thought. I'd once read a collection of notes from people who attempted suicide, and according to that, some whose suicides failed were kept in isolation wards for weeks or months in the name of recuperation. Those who were likely to make another attempt had to be temporarily restrained.

Judging from the soft treatment here, I had to imagine Hajikano's fall into the sea was being treated as an accident resulting from lack of attention. After all, she was extremely calm now, and maybe it was judged better to call it an accident than brand a sixteen-year-old as a suicide attempter. Or maybe they really did think it was an accident?

Hajikano looked up at the clock. "My father will come pick me up in about an hour. Would you be all right riding home with me?"

I wasn't really in favor of meeting with her father, but not wanting to refuse her good will, I nodded my head. "Thanks. I'll do that."

I took a folding chair leaning against the wall, set it up by the bed, and sat down. Hajikano clapped as she remembered something, opened the fridge, took out two cups of mizu-youkan, and handed one to me. I thanked her.

While throwing away the empty container and plastic spoon in

the trash can, Hajikano sighed all of a sudden.

“After you left yesterday, Hinohara, I kept reading through my diary. It seems that besides just you, I was also relatively friendly with Chigusa Ogiue and my classmate from elementary school, Yosuke Fukamachi.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I nodded, hiding my inner turmoil.

“The four of us gathered every night to stargaze, correct?”

“Right. At first, it was just you doing it, but one day Fukamachi joined you. And later, so did me and Ogiue.”

“We must have had fairly close relationships to see each other every night.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say we hit it off perfectly. But there was a fairly friendly mood.”

“Say, Hinohara.” She looked into my eyes. “Why is it only you’ve visited, and the other two haven’t contacted me at all? Did I exhaust all the good will out of Ogiue and Fukamachi?”

I’d anticipated her asking about the other two since the moment I learned about her diary yesterday. Once she read back a few weeks, it was natural she’d have doubts about the other stargazing members not showing up or contacting her. So I was sure to prepare an answer to that question in advance.

“You’re assuming much worse than it is.” I smiled to soothe her. “First, Fukamachi seems to have his own perspective on things. I asked him to come visit, but he said “It’s best to leave her be for now.” The truth is, I think he wanted to stop me from coming too. Guess he’s really prudent... worried in the weirdest ways. Now, Ogiue - and this surprised me too - she’s moving to Canada in September as a foreign exchange student. Said she always wanted to do that. Thinking about it, though, she *was* better in English than

any of her other subjects. She probably didn't tell anyone until she left because she didn't want to be annoying."

Hajikano looked down thoughtfully, and after about two breaths of silence, closed her eyes and smiled.

"You're so kind, Hinohara."

"What do you mean?", I played dumb.

"Exactly what it sounds like."

Hajikano seemed to have decided not to press me on my excuses.

"And I have to say, it's rather unexpected. Reading my diary, I had the impression you were more blunt and foul-mouthed... but talking with you now, I don't get that feeling."

"I'm holding off since it's a hospital."

"As I thought, you're taking care not to injure me?"

How would Hinohara respond here? My thoughts raced.

I replied like so.

"Yeah, that's right. Wouldn't want you killing yourself again."

At this, Hajikano's expression brightened slightly.

"It helps for you to treat me with such honesty."

She patted the space to her right. "Over here, please."

I sat down next to her as told. Because of the safety bars on the side, there was little room to sit, so our shoulders ended up stuck together. Being so close made it more obvious than ever how our bodies differed. It was striking, as if my body's blueprint was drawn with a ruler and pencil, and her body's blueprint was drawn with a curved rule and drafting pen. There was a large contrast in degree of detail as well, and her skin was as white as if someone forgot to color it. My skin had been tanned light brown over the course of the past month.

“Hey, Hinohara, please tell me.” Hajikano put her hands together on her thighs, bent forward a little, and looked up at my face. “About all the things I’ve forgotten. There’s only so much written in my diary.”

“There’s no need to rush,” I said admonishingly. “For now, you can focus on resting your body and mind. No one will hurry you up, so you can remember slowly.”

“But I can’t keep troubling you all, can I? And also...”

“Also?”

Hajikano stood up wordlessly, put her hand on the window frame, and looked up at the sky.

“You may scold me for saying this, Hinohara.” She turned around, then smiled in a way that emphasized it was a joke. “If getting back my memories led me to attempt suicide again, I believe I would make sure not to fail this time. I think doing that would be a resolution, in its own way. My worries would vanish, and no one would be getting pushed around by me any longer.”

Without thinking, I stood up and grabbed Hajikano’s shoulder. She seemed extremely startled and cowered, but I think I was even more surprised. My mind couldn’t keep up with my actions. Whoa, what am I trying to do here? But my body moved before I could think. Once my hands went around her back, I finally understood the mistake I was about to make, but it was too late. A moment later, I was embracing Hajikano from the front.

Is there an action more cowardly than this?, I wondered. Using another person’s name to hug a girl I’d kept pining after unrequited. This was a complete violation of the rules. No excuse would hold water. Once her memory returned, I would be rightfully scorned.

But, I thought at the same time. What was I planning to do at this point? Ten days left. In just ten days, I would have to leave this world. Couldn't I be forgiven a lie like this? I wouldn't be punished for some slightly happy memories at the end, would I?

"H-Hinohara?"

Hajikano said my name - no, *his* name - questioning the meaning of my actions. She was stiff with confusion, but still didn't push me away. I stroked her back to calm her, but this had the complete opposite effect. My arms sought her warmth and hugged her body tighter.

"You don't have to remember anything," I said into her ear. "When someone forgets something, it means it should be forgotten. So there's no need to force yourself to remember."

"...Is that right?"

"It is."

She thought, with her face still buried in my chest.

"But... I'm uneasy. I feel I'm forgetting something tremendously important."

I shook my head. "It's a common illusion. Even if it's trash, as soon as you lose it, it makes you uneasy. What if what you threw away really held unbelievable value? But turning over the trash can to get it back, you'll find it's just trash after all."

Hajikano twisted her body as if in pain, and I noticed I was holding her tighter than I thought, so I quickly weakened my grip.

"Yes, that's about the right strength." The tension left Hajikano's body with relief.

"Sorry," I apologized, then went on. "...People end up forgetting lots of things sooner or later. Only a handful of people can remember every little thing. But nobody complains about it.

Why do you think that is? Because in the end, memories are no more than trophies or mementos, and everyone knows deep in their heart that what's important is the present, this very moment."

I slowly released Hajikano from my arms, and she dizzily stepped away and fell back on the bed. She looked at me with a peaceful expression. After a few seconds, she came to her senses, and seeming to be struck with the worry that someone was seeing this, looked around restlessly. Seeing her so distracted was new to me, so I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Hey, Hajikano. It's still summer break. And it's no ordinary summer. It's the summer when we're sixteen. Instead of worrying about your lost memories, don't you think it's wiser to enjoy this time?"

She stared at her lap, thinking about what I said. Eventually, she spoke.

"...Yes, you might be right. But even if you tell me to enjoy this moment, I don't know what exactly I should do."

I responded at once. "I'll help. I mean, let me help."

Hajikano blinked with surprise at the quickness of my reply.

"This may be a naive question," she began, fiddling with her hair, "but why would you go so far for me?"

"I can tell you, but you might regret asking."

"I don't care. Please, tell me."

"It's simple. I like you, Hajikano. And not as a friend, but as a girl. So I want to lend my aid, if only a little. And hopefully be liked a little in return."

Geez, did I understand what I was doing? I kept being taken aback by myself. Deceiving a girl with memory loss by assuming a friend's name, confusing her, and opening my heart about what I

couldn't confess to her before. I was no different from a guy wooing a girl by abusing his social standing and getting her drunk to lower her defenses.

"Wait, hold on a moment." Hajikano had a complicated expression that could be taken as anger or on the verge of tears, and she seemed very bewildered. "I mean... Um, in my diary, it seemed like you were captivated by Ogiue..."

"The writer of that diary must have thought so. But that's not the truth. From the day we met, I've been captivated by you."

Hajikano opened her mouth to say something, but it seemed like the words broke up into pieces before they got out her throat. I waited for her to gather them back up, but her lost words wouldn't return.

She began putting together new words. And once she blinked with a certain level of conviction, she lifted her head. She put her hands on the bed to stand up, then fell toward me. I caught her thin body immediately, holding onto it carefully.

"I'll stop trying to remember," Hajikano said in a slightly blurred voice. "There couldn't be any memories more wonderful than this moment, after all."

I stroked her head like a little child's. "That's for the best."

Hajikano kept repeating "Hinohara, Hinohara" into my chest to confirm my existence. Every time I heard her say that someone else's name, my heart ached.

She released her arms from me and wiped tears at the edge of her eyes with her palm. Wind coming through the window blew her hair, and right after, the buzz of cicadas returned as if time was resuming. Up to then, I had only heard Hajikano's voice.

"Hinohara, please assist me," she said, holding down her hair

with one hand. “Make at least the last ten days of my summer of sixteen wonderful ones.”

“Leave it to me.”

I firmly grabbed her right hand as she extended it.

We didn’t let go until her father came to pick her up.

*

The next day, a letter arrived at my house. I took it out of the mailbox and flipped the envelope over. When I saw the sender’s name, I gulped.

It was a letter from Chigusa Ogiue.

It didn’t seem I had been sent a letter from beyond the grave. There was a sticker indicating the date to be sent in the corner, and the postmark was from eight days ago. August 14th, the day Chigusa suggested that I desert Hajikano. Chigusa gave me a letter about Hajikano’s past on August 15th, but it seemed she had left another one.

There should have been plenty of opportunities, so why didn’t Chigusa give me this letter directly? Did she anticipate dying before she could meet with me and talk, and thus leave this letter just in case? But if that were it, why have it sent eight days later?

Itching to know the answer, I went to my room, opened the envelope, and took out the folded letter. It was familiar stationery. The same as the letter she gave me on the 15th. I sat down in a chair and looked over it.

“Fukamachi, you must be wondering why you’re receiving a letter from me at this time,” the letter began. “To tell the truth, I don’t quite know either. Let us say the reason is: “Thinking that on

August 15th, you would be distraught over Hajikano's suicide attempt and my disappearance, I left a few days gap to not confuse you further." But perhaps deep down, I feel that this letter shouldn't reach you, Fukamachi. Why? Because written here is a way for both you and Hajikano to survive."

I read over that sentence three times to be sure I wasn't misreading it. "A way for both you and Hajikano to survive." That was, indeed, what it said.

Holding off my impatience, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"However," it went on. "This is, in a sense, a fantasy of mine. I have not a shred of proof, and even if my predictions are all correct, there is not even a whole percent of chance that you will be saved. So please, do not get your hopes up."

There was a double line break after that. Here comes the juicy part, I supposed.

"I have had five exchanges with the woman on the phone thus far. Most of the calls were at night, but just once, the phone rang in the evening. Exactly at 5 PM on July 29th. I remember the time because just as I answered the phone, I heard a chime indicating 5 PM on the other side of the call. Since I heard it so clearly, she must have been very close to the speaker."

Now that it was brought to my attention, I realized how I didn't pay much attention to background noise when I talked with the woman on the phone. But consciously searching my memories for it, I felt there were often noises like wind during our conversations.

"I will get to the point. That woman is somewhere in this town," the letter continued. "The chime I heard was clearly the Mermaid's Song. It goes without saying that this chime is used to

indicate evening only in Minagisa. And one more point. I did not only hear the Mermaid's Song. Just before the call ended, I heard train brakes on the other end. It was around 5:05 PM. As you're aware, the tracks that run through Minagisa are single-track, and thus few in number. The places where, at that time, one could hear both the chime and brakes nearby, are extremely limited."

I swallowed. A bead of sweat fell from my forehead onto the letter.

"Now, let me present a convenient theory. "When that woman calls us, she always uses a specific phone booth." Of course, I have hardly any proof of this. I just heard many of the same noises each time, so I thought it would not be too unusual. ...Now, following this hopeful assumption, I had a somewhat interesting discovery. There exist at most only four or five public phones in Minagisa where you can both hear the 5 PM chime and brakes at 5:05 PM."

But, I thought.

What would I do with that knowledge?

"Perhaps nothing can be done with that knowledge," Chigusa wrote. "Assuming you learn the place that woman is calling from, and by overlapping coincidences, end up present while she is calling there, I do not think she would be open to any dealings with you. Not only that, it may end up angering her. Or perhaps the woman on the phone is no more than a conceptual entity with no physical form, who cannot be found anywhere on the Earth. In any case, a search for her is most likely to end in vain. Any amount of effort may only be a waste of the time you have left. And yet, even so, is it not preferable to meeting your final day having done nothing? ...Of course, the best thing would be to win the bet with fair methods. But considering Hajikano's current state, that also feels extremely

unrealistic. I cannot even be sure if she will be alive by the time this letter reaches you. (Though naturally, even if Hajikano tried to kill herself being unable to bear the weight of her sin, perhaps the woman on the phone would save her to prolong her bet with you.)”

Then Chigusa began to wrap up the letter around the next sentence.

“There is very much I’d like to tell you, Fukamachi, but I think I will discuss those things with you in person. It’s strange; one should be able to more accurately describe things in writing than orally, but everyone ultimately trusts the latter more. Maybe accuracy isn’t such an important thing when it comes to words. Well then, tomorrow - eight days ago, to you - I look forward to meeting you.”

I re-read the letter four times, folded it up, and put it back in the envelope.

I was happy that Chigusa was wishing for my safety to the very last moment. But it was just like she said; a search for the woman on the phone would most likely end in vain. If by some mistake I found that woman, I could say nothing after having already been given a penalty for “acting in violation of the rules” just yesterday. I couldn’t imagine there being any room for negotiation. And as Chigusa also indicated, it wasn’t guaranteed she was even a physical entity.

No matter from what perspective, using my remaining ten days to find the woman and have her rescind the bet seemed like a dim prospect. And I would rather use my time for Hajikano than stake it on a long shot.

I’d had it with this sink-or-swim bet.

I stuck the envelope in a drawer and left the house.

At this point, I recalled something I’d neglected to ask the

woman on the phone. She once connected the lines to give me at home and Hajikano at Chakagawa Station a chance to talk on the phone, but to what aim? To give me a faint hope so as to deepen the despair later? I had gotten no explanation about it from her. Something's strange there, I thought. I didn't know how to express it, but something didn't sit right.

*

After thirty minutes by train, switching over to a bus for ten minutes on an old highway, and after getting off the bus, walking for twenty more minutes through a riverside residential district with map in hand, I finally arrived at Hajikano's grandma's house.

It was an awfully old two-story house. Numerous tiles were missing from the roof, the paint peeled more the higher you went up the clinker-built walls, and the cracked polished glass of the kitchen was patched up with packing tape. Along the path to the front door, the boughs and leaves of overgrown trees formed a tunnel. Ducking under the tunnel to reach the door, I smelled a unique scent mixing nukazuke, boiling food, grilled fish, and rush plants. To say it outright, the smell of an old person's house.

Yesterday, Hajikano had given me directions here as I left.

"I'm forbidden from going out on my own. I think it'll be difficult for me to meet you, Hinohara. So I'm sorry, but can you come meet me?"

"Of course I will," I said, and Hajikano smiled softly.

Hajikano was to recuperate for a while here. There was nothing to stimulate her here, and no worry of meeting people she knew and digging up memories. Also, as I'd heard it from Aya,

Hajikano had been rather attached to their grandmother on her father's side, who lived alone here. Even after those blank four days that drastically altered her personality, she would come here on her own periodically. Her parents probably took that into account and decided this house would be a perfect place for recuperation. Her grandmother didn't especially see eye to eye with her son and his wife, but seemingly opened up to her granddaughter Hajikano.

After ringing the doorbell, I heard the floor creak, and some time later, the glass sliding door opened. There appeared a thin woman over 70 or so. Her hair was all white and her skin wrinkled, but she stood up startlingly straight. Looking closer at her wrinkled face, the left and right sides had a different feel; her right eye seemed to glare at me, yet her left eye observed me neutrally. Her mouth was firmly shut, and she gave me an impression of considerable intelligence for her age.

So, this was Hajikano's grandmother.

I opened my mouth to explain myself, but she shook her head.

"Aya's already told me. Come in."

With only that, Hajikano's grandma turned her back and went inside. Wanted me to come along? I went inside and politely closed the sliding door, took off my shoes, and followed her. With each step down the hall, the plywood floor creaked.

Opening a screen door to enter an old Japanese-style room, Hajikano's grandma sat at a low table. Seeing me standing in front of the door with nothing to do, she looked stunned. "What're you doing? Sit."

I sat at the table, then asked, "Where is Miss Yui?"

"Still in the bath. She must've been tired yesterday, since she slept as soon as she got here."

Seeming to remember something, she stood up and left the room, leaving me behind.

I took a look around the room. The first thing I noticed was a giant altar. It was decorated with two small watermelons and two ears of corn, arranged symmetrically on the left and right. There was a wicker lounge chair with a half-read book on the seat. On an antique shelf were two Japanese-style dolls in a glass case. There was a calendar hanging from a lintel that was still on May. While it was an orderly room, it seemed like it ended up the way it had not because of frequent cleaning, but because it didn't see much in the way of being "lived in."

Hajikano's grandmother soon returned and poured me barley tea in a glass. I thanked her, took a sip, and spoke.

"Could I ask your name, ma'am?"

"Yoshie Hajikano," she answered. "Wasn't it on the plate outside?"

"Mrs. Yoshie, what has Miss Aya told you?"

"That my fool granddaughter jumped in the sea and came back with her memories gone. And so now I need to look after her."

"I see." If she knew that much, it seemed I didn't have to tiptoe around things with her. "Incidentally, what do you think of me?"

"I hear you're a curious man who likes diving into trouble." Yoshie's lips lifted just a millimeter. "Aya seems mighty fond of you."

That expression she briefly showed me was the spitting image of Aya's smile. Aya sure takes after her, I thought.

I guessed that Aya hadn't told Yoshie that I was Yosuke Fukamachi in the guise of Yuuya Hinohara. Way to go, Aya, making allowances for a lie like that. It was just more convenient for Yoshie

not to know about my use of a fake name.

Yoshie took a cigarette from the table and lit it with a match. She put out the match with familiar movements and put it in a glass ashtray, then took in a deep breath of smoke, letting it out slowly.

“Want something to eat?”

“No, I’m fine.”

After that, we didn’t exchange a word up until Yoshie’s cigarette was done. Through a bamboo screen, I heard windchimes. Listening closely, I heard the water of a shower from the other side of the hall. They were refreshing sounds to be sure, but in reality, it was swelteringly hot in the room. The sun-baked fan next to the altar wasn’t having any real effect, and there was no way this house had air conditioning.

The awkward silence continued. The clock on the wall was broken, so I didn’t know the exact time, but it felt like twenty minutes at least. It was like a bunch of ancient time had been locked in this room and came out now to lengthen the gap before Hajikano appeared.

After carefully putting out the cigarette flame, Yoshie put an elbow on the table and put her chin in her palm.

“Somebody’s gotta keep watch.”

“Keep watch?”

“On Yui,” she clarified. “Say Yui’s memories suddenly come back. If nobody’s there at the time, she might carry on with what she was up to before.”

I nodded.

“But I can’t watch her 24 hours a day, and I’m sure she doesn’t want that either. Neither of us are fans of being rigid. ...So. How about you keep watch on Yui when I’m not?”

“Yes, that was my intention. I can handle her during the day -”

“It’s settled,” she grinned, looking like she was waiting to hear just that. “You go back home and bring changes of clothes and toiletries.”

I twisted my neck, not following.

“Err... What do you mean?”

“You’ll keep watch, won’t you? Hinohara, eh. Starting now, you’re working for me. The pay won’t be much more than pocket change, but you’ll get three tasty meals a day. Just ’til the end of summer vacation, stay in this house and keep a close eye that she doesn’t get any funny ideas.”

“Are you being serious?”, I asked impulsively.

“’Course, I’m opposed to living under the same roof with an adolescent boy and girl too. But... you do have Aya’s endorsement.”

“Have you gone over this with Hajikano?”

“I’m about to.”

Just then, the hallway floor creaked, and the sliding door opened. Hajikano wore a T-shirt with a wide neckline and shorts, holding a bath towel in one hand.

“Granny, I think the water heater’s broken. The shower water only came out cold...”

There, Hajikano went silent, looked at my face, and gave a shrill yelp as she retreated into the hall.

“H-Hinohara? You’re here already?”, she said from behind the door. “Sorry, can you stay there for a while? I’ll be ready soon.”

“Guess I might have come a little too early. Should I wait outside?”

“No, wait there. It’ll be really quick.”

I heard Hajikano hurrying up the stairs.

Even after she left, a sweet soap smell still lingered.

“Never mind the money,” I said. “For the right to be with Hajikano, I’d be willing to pay *you*. When Hajikano gets back, I’ll say farewell and go back home for my luggage.”

“So you accept the job?”

“Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Yoshie.”

“Hmm.”

Yoshie snorted and closed her eyes, which again felt just like what Aya would do. She’s definitely blood-related to the Hajikano sisters, I recognized again.

When Hajikano reappeared twenty minutes later, she had changed from her earlier casual outfit to a frilly sleeveless shirt. Her hair still hadn’t dried, bits of moisture still on it.

“Sorry for the wait.” Hajikano sat at the table and looked restlessly between me and Yoshie. “What were you two talking about?”

I casually glanced at Yoshie, but she bluntly averted her gaze to tell me “explain it yourself.”

I thought for a little bit, then asked. “Hey, Hajikano. What would you think if I told you I was going to stay over here for a while?”

“Huh...?” She froze with mouth hung open for a few seconds. “What do you mean?”

I hesitated for how to reply. I couldn’t give her the unvarnished truth of “I was asked to watch and make sure you don’t commit suicide.” I glanced at Yoshie again seeking help, and with a reluctant look, she offered it.

“I asked him. I wanted help with a few things, like household chores and shopping. So I could use a manservant. And Yui, you

wouldn't get bored with him around, would you?"

"That's true, but this is too quick...", Hajikano said so quietly I could barely make it out.

"Huh, you don't want it? Looked so excited for him to come this morning."

"G-Granny..." She crossed her index fingers in her direction. "Um, well, I don't mind at all. I just thought it might be bothersome for Hinohara..."

"It's decided," Yoshie nodded with satisfaction.

I turned to Hajikano. "I need to go home for the moment and get my things. I should be back in three hours, so wait here."

"Okay, got it. I'll take you to the bus stop."

Hajikano glanced toward Yoshie as if to get confirmation.

"Be off, you two," she waved as if to drive us away.

Once we left the house, Hajikano questioned me.

"So, what did you really talk about?"

"I was hired to keep an eye on you. In other words, uh..."

As I pondered how to phrase it, Hajikano smiled bitterly.

"Yeah, because I attempted suicide. Not surprising."

"I'm grateful you can put it so succinctly," I sighed with relief.

"Hey, Hinohara," Hajikano said bashfully. "If you've been hired to watch me, then don't lose sight of me."

"Right. If it's not a bother."

"Of course not. Is it a bother for you, Hinohara?"

"Surely not. Whatever it is, I'm glad for an excuse to be with you, Hajikano."

She stood up tall and ruffled my head. "Nice and honest." It felt somehow nostalgic. Back in grade school, she would pat my

head like that over everything. Even if her memory was lost, she still retained habits like this.

I parted from Hajikano at the bus stop, and took about an hour getting home. No one was home, so I left a note saying “I’m staying at a friend’s house for about ten days” on the dining table. I frequently stayed at Hinohara’s house in middle school, so my parents likely wouldn’t think much of it. I puzzled over whether to take the letters from Chigusa, but I couldn’t be sure Hajikano wouldn’t read them by some accident, so I decided to leave them. Putting the minimum amount of clothes and toiletries in a bag, I quickly left the house.

I arrived back at Hajikano’s house at noon. After a tasty meal of chilled Chinese noodles with lots of toppings, Yoshie ordered us to clean the house. She took all the bathrooms, while Hajikano and I worked together to clean the rooms, study, closet, hallways, and stairs. I wore clothes I could afford to get dirty, and with a bucket of soapy water and a bucket of clean water, we went wiping the windows of each room. The water in the buckets quickly turned murky, so we had to replace it each time.

Once done cleaning windows, we took feather dusters and went knocking off dust in the rooms. After sweeping it together with a broom and throwing it away, we wiped the tatami mats with a rag. The trash bag ended up full of dust and dirt, making me want to sneeze just looking at it.

“It kind of feels like you really were hired as a helper,” Hajikano smiled, watching me wipe a mat on all fours.

Hajikano was accustomed to cleaning these old-style rooms, so she taught me how you should sweep brooms along the pips of tatami mats, and how they were weak to moisture. I questioned

why she remembered details about cleaning despite losing her memory and asked her about it. She stopped working and thought.

“Hmm... I don’t really know, either. I just can’t remember most new things I learned in the past few years, or how I got high school... So maybe it’s simply the events of the past few years I’ve forgotten. It’s not about the nature of the memories.”

“Until when exactly can you remember?”

Hajikano looked into space and searched her memory.

“I can clearly remember up to about winter in my first year of middle school. From there to the present, there’s a big gap. ...I’m sure that’s about the time my life started going downhill.”

I looked up in surprise. “So right now, you’re really kind of like a first-year in middle school?”

“Precisely speaking, not really. But you can think that way if you like, Hinohara-senpai,” Hajikano giggled.

Once we were done cleaning the hallways and stairs, we concluded with the entryway. After sweeping away dust with a broom, we sprayed water and scrubbed the concrete floor with brushes. The water turned black in no time. We brought the cleaning tools back to the storeroom just as Yoshie was finishing up most of her tasks.

No sooner had we finished our big cleanup than Yoshie handed us a bamboo basket and had us harvest vegetables from the garden. Thorn-covered cucumbers, tomatoes with a grassy smell, corn with long whiskers. After the harvest came watering the plants. While spraying plants whose names I didn’t know with a hose, a thin rainbow appeared over the garden, and Hajikano happily clapped her hands. In the midst of winding the hose back on the reel, I heard the water dripping from the leaves.

Dinner used the freshly-picked produce lavishly. After dinner was over, we even helped with washing, then Yoshie sat in a lounge chair by the window and opened up the evening paper. Hajikano and I waited around for her next instruction, and she spoke to us.

“Do as you please for the rest of the day. Go wherever you want.”

We looked at each other. “Should we go outside for now?”, Hajikano asked. I gave my approval.

Without a destination in mind, we walked together in the sunset town. A chorus of higurashi who survived up to the end of summer echoed from the thickets around the houses. It wasn’t even 5 PM yet, but a brilliant sunset dyed our surroundings. It wasn’t the blazing red sunset seen in the city, but an orange sunset that seemed to steal the sense of reality from all things.

We walked without aim through what felt like an old memory. Buying soda pop from a shop and sitting on a nearby bench to drink it, I made a discovery.

Thinking back, from the time we left the house to now - a period of about thirty minutes - Hajikano had never once walked on my right side. I didn’t know if it was conscious or not, but she was probably wary of showing the side of her face with the birthmark to me.

Once I noticed that, I found more of her little considerations one after another. When talking to me, it seemed she didn’t change the angle of her face much, doing her best to hide the birthmark from sight. And after wiping sweat from her forehead, she always put her bangs to the left, and sometimes put her left hand to her cheek for no reason.

Why was she so sensitive? No, I didn’t think that. Because I had

constantly stayed on Hajikano's right side when with her before. Wanting her to remember me being at least a little less ugly.

Hajikano opened the ramune bottle cap, took out the marble, and held it between her thumb and index finger up to the sun. I imitated her and looked through the marble; it was like a little lens that flipped the scenery, resulting in the appearance of an orange sea.

"The sun's setting early these days," I said.

"August is almost over." Hajikano swayed her legs from the bench. "In less than two weeks, we probably won't even hear these cicadas anymore."

She stood up and tossed her bottle in the collection box, then spun around and smiled at me.

"But the days getting shorter is a good thing."

"You like night, Hajikano?"

"Right. It lets me forget about my birthmark."

"I like it, myself."

"Thanks. But I'm sure there are many people who hate it." She softly put her left hand on her cheek. "Including me."

We started walking again. Even once the sun went down, heat clung to the ground. Seeking a cool-down, we entered the nearest supermarket. It was bizarrely dark inside, and the AC made it disagreeably cold. After fully checking out its selection, we went upstairs and through an arcade to the rooftop parking lot. It was already pitch black outside. There were no other tall buildings in the area, so we could see the spotty lights of the residential district below.

Time passed slowly by. We put our elbows on the paint-peeled and splintered guardrails, talking aimlessly as we gazed at the

modest night scenery. Being on a rooftop at night, I couldn't help but recall the four of us gathering at the ruined hotel to stargaze, but I tried to keep the pain and anguish from showing.

Hajikano used a toothpick to carry pieces of cherry candy she bought earlier to her mouth, one by one. As I casually watched her, she seemed to misunderstand and held out the toothpick with a piece on it. "Do you want some, Hinohara?" Before I could even take the toothpick from her, she brought it to my mouth instead. It was such a naturally-performed action, I naturally opened my mouth too. It's just like we've gone back to four years ago, I thought. Back then, she would calmly do things that scared me out of my wits.

"Should we go back now?"

Hajikano reached for the last piece. But seemingly not pierced well enough with the toothpick, it fell from her hand off the edge, down to the ground against the night wind.

Back at Yoshie's house, since it seemed the water heater was indeed broken, we reluctantly took buckets and towels to a local bathhouse. We paid the old manager 300 yen each, and agreeing to meet up an hour later, I parted from Hajikano. But the bathtub was so hot, I stepped out before even 30 minutes went by.

Until Hajikano came back, I sat in front of a fan and absentmindedly watched TV. There was a special on about a robbery than took place half a month ago. One of the culprits wore bandages of some sort around his face, so the news dubbed him the "Mummy Man" for convenience. Such a summer-esque incident, I irresponsibly thought.

Hajikano returned five minutes earlier than promised. She bought fruit milk and sat down next to me, and without saying

anything, looked to the TV. After finishing her milk, she returned the bottle to a case by the vending machine. Then, thinking of something, she stood behind me and rustled my hair with both hands. I did the same in return, and she laughed ticklishly.

We returned home in the cool night air, our sandals leisurely clopping against the ground. At home, we got futons out of the closet and prepared our respective beds. Yoshie was in the second floor bedroom, and Hajikano and I in the first-floor old-style room with a screen between us.

While Hajikano was stooping over to light a mosquito coil, Yoshie took the opportunity to whisper to me.

“Just so you know, the quietest noises echo in this house. So don’t even think about anything funny.”

I shrugged. “I understand that.”

Once Yoshie closed the dividing screen and went upstairs, I lay on the futon and turned off the light. I was exhausted from being worked hard all day, and the smell of a stranger’s house felt restless, but on top of that, knowing Hajikano was there on the other side of a screen door mere centimeters away made me too awake to sleep.

I closed my eyes and focused on the monotone sounds of insects, waiting for drowsiness. Then I heard Hajikano quietly call for me through the screen.

“Hinohara, are you awake?”

“I am,” I whispered back.

“Doesn’t this feel kind of like a school trip?”

“Want to throw pillows?”

“Boys have some funny ideas,” Hajikano laughed.

It seemed like she was up very close to the screen. It would be

bad if our voices were heard upstairs, so I got close too and kept my voice as low as possible.

“Well, what ideas do girls have?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Girls talk about their second-most crush.”

“Second-most?”

“Yes, second-most. Because your number-one crush absolutely can’t overlap with anyone else’s. You don’t want to alert your competition, either. So no one ever speaks about their number-one crush. But second crushes - even if those overlap, it won’t make things so tense, will it? Which means the boy who should be the most popular in class never gets his name mentioned at all.”

“That’s an interesting way of thinking.”

“It’s absolutely true. I knew a bunch of precocious girls who confessed to boys right before elementary school graduation, and they were all completely different from the “crushes” they talked about on our class trip.”

“In other words, when you open up on a class trip, it’s more like a sounding-out?”

“That’s right. Nothing good comes of being foolishly honest. Well, in grade school, at least. I don’t know what my middle school class trip was like.”

I paused for a breath, then spoke. “Well, did you join in with giving the name of your second-most crush, Hajikano?”

“That’s a secret.”

“It was elementary school. There’s no reason to hide it now, is there?”

“No, I just can’t. My head is still in middle school, after all,” she said anticlimactically. Then she asked, to change the subject, “What about boys? Don’t tell me you threw pillows at each other for an

hour before bed?”

“Boys are no different. Everyone talked about the girls they liked on day one. ...Of course, in our case, it’s not like we gave the name of the girl we liked second-best.”

“You were honest and spilled the beans about your favorite?”, Hajikano asked with surprise.

“Honest may not be the right word. I don’t know if all boys are like this, but the guys I was with always phrased it like, “I don’t have a crush on any girls per se, but if I had to say, maybe her.””

Naturally, I wasn’t part of that circle then, and hid alone under my futon.

“Boys sure are cute,” Hajikano said.

“Well, if you compare with how the girls do it, I guess it’s kinda cute.”

Hajikano cleared her throat like some kind of signal, then asked me: “Hey, Hinohara, do you have a crush on any girls?”

“Not especially, but if I had to say, maybe Hajikano,” I replied with a laugh. “And you?”

“I like Yosuke.”

For a moment, my spine froze, thinking she had seen through me. But thinking about it more, that couldn’t be. The “closest boys” to Hajikano right now were Yuuya Hinohara and Yosuke Fukamachi, so she had simply given the name of the one who couldn’t be her first pick as her “second-most crush.”

Yet, even if it was a meaningless statement that arose by chance from the flow of the conversation, I couldn’t help but feel joy over hearing the words “I like Yosuke” from Hajikano’s mouth. I etched her words into my memory. Not only the lyric and melody, but even details of the intonation. Along with the illusion of

happiness I felt on hearing it.

Then, I suddenly remembered the “penalty” the woman on the phone had mentioned. “Henceforth, you are forbidden from revealing your true identity in front of Hajikano.” So she said, with no further explanation. But there were numerous ways I could convey to her that I was Yosuke Fukamachi without directly revealing my identity. Would using those indirect means also count as a violation of the rules? And in what sense was she using the word “forbidden,” anyway? Did it simply mean that the action would be punished? Or else - like the witch in The Little Mermaid - she had made it impossible to reveal who I really was around Hajikano?

I decided to test out one such “gray area” method. My procedure would be as follows. I would ask if Hajikano kept goldfish in her house in elementary school. Once she told me yes, I would guess one of the goldfish’s names was “Hinoko.” If she asked how I knew, I would say “I just had a feeling.” By doing that, I wouldn’t be revealing myself directly, and Hajikano would find it strange that I knew the name of her goldfish. Of course, that alone was no proof that I was Yosuke Fukamachi. But it would provide an opportunity for her to start wondering it.

I put my plan into action. “Hey, Hajikano.”

“What is it?”

“In elementary school, did you -”

Instantly, a sharp pain rain through my throat. Like burning tongs had been thrust into it. My throat was blocked, so I couldn’t even scream, and curled up to endure the pain as a cold sweat ran down me.

“What’s wrong?”, Hajikano asked through the screen. “Are you

hurt?”

I wanted to say I was fine to put her at ease, but I was unable to move or reply. Worried about the lack of response, she quietly opened the screen and asked, “Hey, what happened?” Seeing me curled up and holding my throat, she sat beside me and stroked my back repeatedly, asking “Are you okay?”

For as great as the pain was, it receded in less than a minute. But it seemed like I sweat an unbelievable amount in that time, so my shirt was soaking wet, and my throat was dry as a desert.

“...I’m okay now. Sorry to worry you.” I smiled at Hajikano. “I’ll get some water.”

I stood up, and she followed me worriedly.

“Are you really okay? Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“Nah. My leg just cramped up a little.”

I had three cups of water in the kitchen and calmed down a little bit.

Back in the room, Hajikano continued to sit by my futon and ask “Are you okay?” “Does it still hurt?” I told her it wasn’t a problem at all anymore, really, but she wouldn’t believe it. After about thirty minutes, she finally went back to her own futon.

“Good night, Hinohara. See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, good night.”

I moved away from the screen back to my former position and closed my eyes again.

Despite the turbulence at the end, generally speaking, it had been a very, very happy day. I thought, in my sinking senses, how I wish it could be another day like this tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that... I would offer all my good fortune toward that purpose. My life would be up in a few days anyhow. I couldn’t

ask for any more happiness than this. If days like these where I could laugh with Hajikano could just continue until the end of summer break, I would be satisfied.

Yet this world gives change to those who seek stability, and stability to those who seek change. This tranquility would end very soon - with this very day. The next day, while I wasn’t looking, Hajikano heard a sound she shouldn’t have.

Yes - the sound of a phone ringing in the darkness.

Chapter 11: This Is Just A Good Luck Charm

The incident occurred in the middle of the night, three days after I started living at Hajikano's grandmother's house. Under the light of a rusty desk lamp, as I turned through the pages of the book Hashiba once gave me, I heard Hajikano catching her breath on the other side of the screen.

It was a horribly hot night. So at first, I thought she was having trouble sleeping and got woken up. A while later, I heard her making deep breaths. Trembling breaths that made me imagine someone stranded in a cabin in a blizzard, awaiting help. Did she have a frightening dream?

While I was indecisive about whether to go look or not, I heard a sliding door open. Not the dividing one, but the one to the hallway. I didn't hear any footsteps, but I found it certain that Hajikano had left the room. Could have been to get water in the kitchen or to use the bathroom, one of the two.

But five minutes passed, and Hajikano hadn't returned. Windchimes rang outside the window. I felt a vague apprehension, put down my book, turned off the lamp, and left the room. Walking carefully to not make a sound, I found the front door left open, the night wind blowing in. I put on sandals and went outside.

I found Hajikano right away. No, "she found me" might be more accurate. Lying against a stone wall, she looked up at the night sky. When she noticed me, she sighed as if she'd been waiting there for hours.

"You finally noticed." Hajikano smiled with her eyes closed. It seemed like a pained smile that was forcing itself to be cheerful. "You need to watch me more carefully. You didn't know I'd snuck

out at night last night and the night before, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. ...Guess I’ve failed as a lookout.”

I sat down next to Hajikano, put up my index finger to confirm that she was windward of me, then took out a cigarette and lit it.

Thanks to the security lights, I didn’t miss the fact that her eyes were red.

“You used to look at the night sky a lot before you lost your memory, too,” I said after letting out my first puff of smoke. “You were a girl who liked stars. Seems like that hasn’t changed.”

“Yes, so it seems.”

It was a somewhat inattentive reply.

“Did you have a bad dream?”

“Wow. Well done.” Hajikano put her fingertips together and her eyes widened. “Why did you think that?”

I couldn’t answer that question. “Did you wake up from nightmares last night, and the night before that?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of dreams were they?”

She shook her head, stood up, and wiped her clothes.

“I already forgot. I only remember being scared.”

“...I see.”

“Hey, Hinohara. Since we’re awake, let’s go for a walk.”

She started walking without waiting for my reply. I got up and followed.

Maybe her dreams had to do with her lost memories. It wasn’t normal to have nightmares for three days straight. Perhaps she’s reliving those “blank four days” in her dreams every night, I thought.

We kept walking the dark roads in silence. Wooden power

poles were placed in intervals along the rice paddies; small mosquitoes gathered around their security lights, and scarab beetles and ground beetles swarmed underneath. There were faint clouds in the sky, the moon dimly shining beyond them.

We did a lap of the residential district, and as we were about to reach the house again, Hajikano broke the silence.

“Hinohara, how long can you stay at my side?”

“What do you mean?”, I asked nonchalantly.

“Who knows? Not me.” She tried to smile, but couldn’t form a very good one. “It’s just... well, Chigusa and Yosuke both left me, didn’t they? So I wondered if you might have to leave me too someday.”

I wanted nothing more than to say “that’s not true at all” and reassure her. And I knew Hajikano was hoping for that. She asked that question because she wanted me to laugh off the tinge of unease her nightmare left her with. To say something like “Me, leave you? I wouldn’t do something so wasteful.”

The problem was, her fear was correct. If I lied to her here, would I be able to keep up a perfect act and fool her to the end? Could I deceive her fully without even a speck of doubt? I had no confidence whatsoever.

If lying now would fill her with distrust, it was better to be honest to an extent - that was my conclusion.

“In seven days,” I answered.

I saw Hajikano’s face freezing.

“I can stay at your side until August 31st. Once that’s over, I’ll have to go far away, for good. I don’t want to leave you either, Hajikano, but it was decided long ago.”

“Far away? Where are you going?”

“I can’t answer that very well.”

“Can you come back sometimes?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Unfortunately, not even that. Once August 31st passes, I think I’ll never be able to meet you again.”

“...Ah.”

Hajikano lowered her head and smiled lonesomely. It was a much more peaceful reaction than I’d expected. Maybe she had the possibility of such a response in mind from the start. Maybe she saw through little incongruities in my actions to figure out I was hiding something.

“I understand. You must have your reasons too, right?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry for hiding it until now. I wasn’t sure how to break it to you.”

“No, I’m sorry for making you worry for me.”

Hajikano mumbled. “Seven days... I see.”

Returning to the house, we quietly walked down the hallway so as not to wake Yoshie, and went to our respective beds.

The next morning, as I opened the screen to wake up Hajikano, I found her sleeping holding her knees, and discovered her diary next to her bed. Ultimately, she had chosen “remembering.” It wasn’t unreasonable. The people near her kept disappearing one after another. It was perfectly natural for her to look into her past wanting to know the reason why. Even if you knew there might be devastating information in there that shakes you to the core.

I gently picked up the diary, sat by the windowsill, and opened it. Maybe by learning the details of the “blank four days,” I would be disappointed with Yui Hajikano - no, I never thought that for a second. Whatever her past was like, I was prepared to accept it.

Even if Hajikano was deeply connected with the suicide of two middle school girls a year ago - for that matter, even if Hajikano killed those two - my feelings for her wouldn't change.

Resisting the desire to read every page over closely, I turned pages in search of July of 1993. My hand stopped on a certain page. Many pages were mostly blank and easy to glance over, but the pages in that area alone were packed with long sentences in thin writing.

There was written the truth of the blank four days.

*

The cogs began to go awry on February 28th, 1993. That day, Hajikano was walking down the street through light snowfall when she had an unexpected reunion with old friends.

Mei Funakoshi and Maiko Aida. They were girls she'd been in the same class with in elementary school. Hajikano noticed the two approaching in front of her and quickly looked for somewhere to hide. But they had her in their sights before she could. Seeing Hajikano's face, they were about to say something, but quickly said "Long time no see" instead. Hajikano reluctantly greeted them back.

Hajikano could easily imagine what they were about to say. By that time, her birthmark had gotten big enough that she couldn't hide it with her hair. These two really want to ask about my birthmark, but they're holding it in, she thought. Just like everyone else. Once they see it, they stare wide-eyed at it, then say something unrelated with an innocent look. Even during conversations, they frequently sneak looks at it. Looks mixing

sympathy and curiosity. But they never refer to the birthmark themselves.

If you're that curious, I'd feel better if you just asked me honestly already, she always thought. Just "What's with that birthmark?" is enough. But people who take that step are rare indeed. They're concerned about touching a sore subject. Not many people understand that some sore subjects hurt less if you just touch them.

These two, too, would surely treat my birthmark like it wasn't there, then talk all about it amongst themselves after leaving, Hajikano figured. However, a few minutes into the conversation, Funakoshi said "by the way," and pointed right at her birthmark. "What's with that birthmark?"

"It's not just an injury, is it?", Aida asked modestly.

"Sorry if this is just me, but Yui, it looks like you're overly tense," Funakoshi said. "Hey, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk about it."

Glad for the two's honest questions, Hajikano began, "Well, actually..." And once she started, she couldn't stop. She talked at length about the changes in her life since the birthmark appeared, letting out what she'd kept in this whole time. How the looks strangers gave her changed, how sometimes people would see it and make their disgust clear, how she became resistant to looking others in the eye while talking, how she was often hampered by being too conscious of those looking at her, how she gradually grew scared of being around others and stayed at home on days off, how she tried to act calm at school but was already terrified inside, and how she had no one to talk to, so she kept all her worries to herself.

Funakoshi and Aida earnestly listened to her. Hajikano decided

to open up to these two in the first place because she felt they would understand. Both of them had body-related worries like Hajikano's. The two were intelligent, charming girls with a sense of humor, but as far as being girls their age went, they had fatal flaws in noticeable places. (The diary didn't give a detailed description of those "flaws." However, much like my likening to the Phantom of the Opera, and Hajikano to the ghost of Oiwa, these girls seemed to receive shameful nicknames related to their appearance as well.)

After hours of opening up, Hajikano thanked the girls.

"Thank you. I've never had people to talk to about this before, so I'm really happy."

"It's fine," Aida said. "I'm kind of glad to know even someone as popular as you is thinking about the same stuff as us."

"If you need anything, talk to us," Funakoshi told her. "And just so you know, we're not saying that to be polite. We really know how you feel, Hajikano."

Then Aida thought of something. "Hey, if it's fine with Yui, do you think we three should keep meeting like this?"

Via this suggestion, Hajikano came to see the other two periodically. They gathered once a week to talk about daily troubles and questions, and the general hardship of life. When they talked together, Hajikano had a sensation of it being one personality split into three to talk amongst itself. Fellow girls plagued with a sense of bodily inferiority could really understand each other, it seems. She was frequently impressed how well they could understand such a subtle mindset.

For instance, Funakoshi said in one meeting: "Honestly, I don't see what's bad about plastic surgery. Or cosmetic surgery? Well, whatever you want to call it. If makeup and perms and dental

correction is permitted, isn't it weird that plastic surgery is frowned upon? Some people say it's rude to cut up the body you got from your parents, but if I were them, I'd say cut away if it makes my kid happy. 'Cause I mean, in a way, ugliness is a kind of sickness."

Hajikano thought about this, then replied. "I've had some thought on that myself... Most people's problems with plastic surgery seem like postscripts. I think at the root of hate toward plastic surgery is enormous trust in the body, and fear of it being betrayed. They're instinctively afraid of the borderline that says "that person is who that person is" being shaken."

"It's like a slippery slope," Aida promptly replied. "Ultimately, you have to allow just leaving the brain and making everything else into a different person."

Funakoshi nodded. "Yeah, like that old question. "A ship's parts get gradually replaced, so when all the parts have been replaced, can you say it's the same ship?" But realistically, nobody's gonna say "this is a totally different ship" when you only replace like 10% of the parts, so I feel like human bodies should get away with 10% replacement too."

"At any rate, our problems can't be solved with plastic surgery, so it's a pointless argument," Aida weakly smiled.

Funakoshi and Hajikano sighed, but there was a comfortable empathy there. An abject relief that they weren't the only one experiencing this irrationality.

Before she knew it, Funakoshi and Aida had become reliable supports for Hajikano. Maybe you could say they were highly codependent. So in spring, when the two gradually started voicing their hate for classmates, alluding toward desires for suicide, she could only think of it as proof they were opening their hearts to

each other.

Their eyes were completely clouded.

On June 4th, Funakoshi and Aida revealed to Hajikano that they were being bullied at school. “It seems like we’ve become outlets for exam-cramming stress,” Funakoshi said to break the news. They talked distantly about what they were going through at school. If they weren’t exaggerating, then it was a hell beyond imagination. Hajikano felt deeply sorry for them, but also felt an oppressive expectation on her. After they were done talking, they seemed to put a threatening silent pressure on her. Like they’d invisibly grabbed her arms and told her “Now that you’ve heard this much, you’re not leaving that easily.”

I might be getting involved in something bad, Hajikano thought.

She was right to be worried. After their bullying came to light, Funakoshi and Aida came to say hateful and despairing things more bluntly than before. The topics were always “I want to die soon,” or “I want to kill so-and-so.” Without any replacement of body parts, the two had become completely different people. They weren’t the Funakoshi and Aida who Hajikano liked anymore. She was just saddened that the girls who once made witty jokes and calmed down those around them had changed like this.

Hajikano had already become unable to join with the two in their discussions, but distancing herself now wasn’t an option. She feared being left out of the group more than anything. If I abandon them, I’ll instantly lose the place I go to with my troubles. Hajikano forced herself to talk with them; if they said they wanted to die, she said she did too, and if they said they wanted to kill someone, she

said the same. Hajikano was Hajikano, but cultivated the madness the other two were heading toward.

Funakoshi and Aida's words continued to escalate. Once it crossed a watershed line, they switched from words to actions.

One day, the two were calm, as if they'd come to their senses. They talked lots, ate lots, laughed lots. Hajikano was delighted, as they seemed to have gone back to how they were months ago. Just maybe, the bullying at school had died down. Now we can be as close as we used to be - just as Hajikano thought this, Funakoshi casually spoke.

"We set fire to it."

Hajikano was dumbfounded and couldn't speak. The two merrily went on. About how last night, they went to the house of the classmate who led the bullies, spread around kerosene, and set fire to it. And how she didn't come to school today. They went to look at the house on their way home, and the building was completely burned, the girl's room showing bare.

"What happened to her?", Hajikano asked quiveringly.

"She didn't die. For better or worse," Funakoshi replied. "But she probably won't be coming to school for a while."

"School was so peaceful today," Aida said heartily. "I never knew how much easier things could be with her gone."

I can't go along with this anymore, Hajikano thought. Steadying her resolve, she encouraged the two to turn themselves in. If the police questioned their classmates, they would quickly discover their hostility toward the girl. You couldn't underestimate the investigation skills of modern police. They could be knocking on your door as soon as tomorrow morning. Wouldn't it be wisest to turn yourself in before that?

“It’s fine, we’ll never be found out,” Funakoshi claimed baselessly - half to convince herself, surely. “As long as the three of us keep quiet.”

“I thought you’d be celebrating with us, Yui,” Aida said with disappointment. “But you kinda just ruined the mood.”

“Hey, Yui, I trust you. But that said, let me tell you something.”

Funakoshi leaned over and whispered in Hajikano’s ear.

“If you betray us, we’ll burn down your house too.”

At this point, Hajikano finally realized there was no going back. She’d already failed to run from this chain of hatred, and kept herself involved in it. There was no appropriate choice. Only an inappropriate choice, and an even more inappropriate choice.

When Hajikano read the newspaper the next day, her face went white, and she nearly collapsed on the spot.

Like the two had told her, they burned down the house, but the girl who led the bullies survived with minor injuries.

Her baby brother, however, had died.

Hajikano folded up the page with the article, put it in her bag, and went to meet Funakoshi and Aida. Naturally, the two of them had looked over every inch of the paper, so they also knew that they’d killed their target’s brother instead of her.

“It’s that girl’s fault,” they repeated defensively, but their eyes were hollow, like they couldn’t even fool themselves.

Gradually, the two of them lost their minds. They feared calls from the police daily, always looked around themselves restlessly, hung their heads and walked fast when they saw police, and shook with surprise when they heard the sirens of police cars or ambulances. They didn’t seem able to get much sleep, so they had

deep bags under their eyes; as if unable to get food down their throats, they grew thinner by the day.

They saw danger in every shadow, and they feared Hajikano's betrayal most. As such, sometimes they would call her over, and repeat their threat of "if you betray us, we'll burn your house down" three times.

"You're planning to betray us anyway, aren't you?", Funakoshi said one day. "But you kept agreeing with us knowing how much we meant it, so you're practically an accomplice. If we get arrested, we're taking you with us."

Unable to bear the self-blame and fear, the thoughts of suicide they previously only entertained started to seem like a realistic escape option. We did nothing wrong; if the police are going to arrest us and expose us, we'd rather die, they said. And Hajikano was naturally included as part of that group suicide.

Aida drew near Hajikano. "If you run away, we'll have the note say "Yui Hajikano threatened us to burn it down; we killed ourselves because we couldn't live with our sin.""

There was nowhere to run. I should have gotten away as soon as I felt something was wrong, Hajikano lamented. The two had given me time to do so. If I'd wanted, I could have even stopped their rampage at an early stage.

No, not only that - maybe that was the exact intent of getting me involved. *The two let me into their group wanting me to put a stop to their wild notions.* And yet, I was too afraid of losing people to share in my injuries with. So not only did I not stop them, I added to their hate.

It was the weakness of my heart that led to this.

Then the day came. On July 12th, 1993, Hajikano was called to a ruined building deep in the mountains. Opening a heavy iron door, she found Funakoshi and Aida sitting in the corner of the room, lit by a square light from a window.

At their feet were bottles of sake and oil cans. When Hajikano saw them, she trembled. The cans were undoubtedly filled with gasoline. The alcohol was probably to get them drunk and slightly lessen their fear of death. The two of them planned to die here today - or three, including herself.

Hajikano earnestly tried to persuade them. What good would this do? You can still recover, start over having atoned for your crimes. Since she had been complicit in the arson, they could all turn themselves in. It was too soon to turn to despair.

But of course, they didn't even listen. They casually poured gasoline on their heads as if it were hot water - putting extra amounts on the body parts that brought about their sense of inferiority - and demanded Hajikano do the same. She refused, so Funakoshi held her down while Aida doused her in gasoline.

Hajikano shook Funakoshi off and tried to run, but there was only one entrance, and the two blocked it. Funakoshi approached with an oil lighter, and Aida also closed in to block her off. Seeming to enjoy watching her back away fearfully, they drove Hajikano into the corner of the room.

I imagined that at that point, maybe their resolve wasn't firm yet. I think Funakoshi probably only put her finger on the flint wheel as a threat. That she actually rubbed the flint was maybe a simple slip of the finger, and in the excitement of the moment, she might have forgotten she was coated in gasoline.

The gasoline ignited like miniature fireworks. In moments,

Funakoshi's body was engulfed in flame. A moment later, there was a shriek like a beast roaring. It wasn't certain whether that was Funakoshi or Aida.

As Funakoshi's body burned, she held her throat with her hands and ran around seeking help. Aida's legs buckled, and when Funakoshi reached out to her, instantly, the fire spread to Aida's body. This time, there was a scream that was clearly Aida's.

Hajikano reflexively ran. Aida's screaming behind her died out in seconds. Once out of the ruins, Hajikano ran as fast as she could, and she thought. No matter how much I hurry, it's twenty minutes to the nearest house. There aren't any public phones around here, are there? She searched her memory, but knew she at least hadn't seen any on the way there. At any rate, she quickly descended the mountain. Not a minute to waste. Not a second to waste.

When she finally found a phone, fifteen minutes had already passed. Hajikano dialed 119 with trembling hands. She told them she saw some strange smoke from the mountains, grew scared when she heard screams, and let them know the exact location of the ruined building, but hung up without revealing herself. Once she put down the receiver, she collapsed on the spot. The public phone continued to ring above her head, likely a redial from the fire department.

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When I looked up from the diary, I made eye contact with Hajikano sitting up from her futon and looking at me. She just had a weak smile, and didn't seem to blame me for reading her diary without permission. Maybe she put her diary by the bed wanting

me to read it in the first place.

“Disappointed, aren’t you?” Hajikano lowered her gaze. “Yui Hajikano - no, *I* left two girls to die, then went on to erase that memory and try to escape the weight of that sin. ...So it seems.”

“Does it say anything like that?” I tilted my head. “It just seemed like the story of a pitiable girl who unluckily got involved in the crimes of others.”

“If everything written here is the truth, then maybe that’s a viable point of view. But there’s no guarantee that I didn’t distort the facts of my past to make it more convenient for me.”

Hajikano stood up, folded her futon, did a small stretch with her back to me, then asked without turning around:

“...Will you still stay with me today?”

“Obviously,” I replied. “I would be even if you said no. I have a lookout job to do, you know.”

“...Yes, so you do.”

Hajikano smiled with relief.

Hajikano was absentminded that day, from beginning to end. She had a slow response to anything I said, and replied to my questions with misdirected answers. Most of the time she looked listlessly into the distance, but she would sometimes rebound and act cheerily, then quickly get tired by it and revert to docility. They were dangerous signs. I paid close attention to her, so that she wouldn’t get any ideas, and so I could respond quickly on the off chance she did.

Half a day passed uneventfully. After dinner, we went to the bathhouse and washed away a day’s worth of sweat. Looks like today will end without incident, I sighed with relief. But that was a

naive estimation. The situation was already headed toward a sharp turn.

Hajikano was waiting for me outside, and as soon as she saw me, she asked “Can we take a detour?” I asked where that would be, but she didn’t answer, saying only “There’s something I want to show you,” and guiding me with a secretive smile. Where was she planning to take me? I mean, there weren’t many places in this town that were a decent destination. Considering the direction, I predicted she was heading toward the sea.

I turned out to be right. Hajikano went straight to the sea, and stopped behind a storehouse in the corner of the pier. A gust made the sleeves of her saxe blue one-piece flutter. The pale blue moon was reflected on the peaceful surface of the water.

Hajikano turned around to face me, took something wrapped in a towel out of her bag, then unwrapped it and handed it to me. It was a small knife. The decorated handle was scratched in places, and the blade was darkly stained. And yet the point was as sharp as if it were just now sharpened.

“What is this?”, I asked.

“I picked it up earlier,” Hajikano replied concisely. “Where do you think I got it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Really?”

“The only place I can think of where you’d pick up a knife is at a dump.”

“A phone booth,” she said. “And Hinohara, I’m going to have you kill me with it.”

Seeing my shock, Hajikano smirked.

“Sorry for playing dumb, Hinohara. To tell the truth, I already

know. How your life's going to end on August 31st, and how the only way you can be saved is by killing me."

Hajikano was blurry in my vision. I was so thrown off, I couldn't even focus my eyes.

"Why do you...", I started to ask, then suddenly realized. "Did the woman on the phone tell you that?"

She slowly nodded. "I was surprised when I first got a call. I was walking around by myself at night, and a public phone suddenly rang. I gave in to curiosity and answered, and without any introduction, the woman on the other end said: "Your memories don't seem to be returning, Yui Hajikano." It was just two days ago. ...Of course, I was so scared I hung up right away, so I didn't hear any more than that."

Hajikano flipped and tilted the knife in her hand, observing it from many angles. Likely not because she wanted to look closely at the knife, but because she didn't want to look me in the eye.

The woman on the phone really didn't seem very pleased with me defiantly enjoying my time with Hajikano, I thought. She wanted to get in my way to the point that she'd twist the way things had been so far - until now, she didn't interfere with anyone but those involved in the bet.

"But when she called again the next night, I could listen to her more calmly. That woman knew all sorts of things only I should know, and in more detail than I did. She even knew exact details from when Funakoshi and Aida died that I didn't write in my diary. I asked her why she knew these things, but she just laughed. I thought, I must be hearing things. I'd already lost my memory, so a malfunction like that wouldn't be too strange."

Hajikano put her index finger to the side of her head and

smiled lonesomely.

“But after the call ended, that event started to feel like a revelation. It wasn’t a big deal whether that woman was a real person, or a fictitious one made up by my subconscious. I came to think that she was trying to tell me something important, and that message was incredibly significant to me. Whether it was coming from inside my head, or from externally.”

She was silent for a few seconds as if confirming the meaning of her words. Then she continued on.

“And just earlier, as I got out of the bath and was waiting for you, the public phone across the street rang. “To tell you the truth, Yuuya Hinohara who you currently live under the same roof with has only days left to live.” “The reason he will only be able to stay with you until August 31st is because he will die on that day.” “And the cause lies with none other than you, Hajikano.” ...Strangely, I wasn’t even surprised. I was able to swallow that irrational declaration. Ahh, of course, I thought. So it probably wasn’t a coincidence that Chigusa and Yosuke went away, either. I didn’t know the reason, but maybe people who depended on me were fated to be unhappy.”

Hajikano looked up from the knife at my face, then quickly lowered her head again.

“After a long silence, like waiting for my despair to set in, the woman went on. “There is not necessarily no way of saving Hinohara. Please, look under the phone book in the booth.” I did that, and on the shelf where the book was, there was this knife. As soon as I grabbed the knife, the woman said: “*Have Hinohara stab you with that knife.* That is the only way to save his life.” Then she hung up.”

Once Hajikano was done, she approached me and held out the knife.

“I don’t think anyone will suspect you if you do it now,” she said. “Everyone in my family knows I’ve attempted suicide, and my sister and granny will verify that you cared for me. Everyone should believe that I ran away while you were in the bath.”

She took my hand and wrapped it around the knife.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to see my death through to the end. Just stab it into my chest and drop me in the sea, Hinohara. Don’t think of it as killing me to save yourself. Please, think of it as killing me to save me. ...If I keep living, I’m sure I’ll make the same mistake again. So end my life by your hand before that happens.”

Hajikano slightly bent her head and gave a transient smile.

I held up the knife she put in my hand and stared at the detailed design that brought to mind the spray of waves.

Tossing the knife into the sea would be easy. But in the end, that would just be a temporary postponement. Simply refusing her demands didn’t seem like it would persuade her.

Holding the knife, I approached Hajikano. She shook briefly, then closed her eyes as if ready for anything.

I brought the knife to her chest, and slid it along her collar to put the blade to her heart. I felt like I could feel it beating through the knife. Hajikano gulped. After a sufficient pause, I slowly moved the knife on her chest. Her face twisted from the sharp pain.

When I removed the knife, there was a light cut about 3 centimeters long. Blood came out of it in no time, dying the fabric of her one-piece. I ran my finger over the wound to wipe the blood. Hajikano’s body stiffened from the pain of having the wound touched.

I painted the right side of my face with the wiped blood.

It was a kind of good luck charm.

“What are you doing?”, Hajikano asked, wide-eyed.

“In Andersen’s The Little Mermaid,” I said, “when the warm blood from the prince’s chest touched her legs, it would fuse them and revert them to a mermaid tail. ...But in my case, I’m sure this much blood is enough.”

Hajikano tilted her head. “I don’t get what you’re saying, Hinohara.”

“Right. You don’t have to. This is just like a good luck charm.”

With a big swing, I tossed the knife toward the open sea. Soon, I heard a distant splash.

“Now, let’s get home and treat that wound.”

Hajikano stared blankly at where the knife fell and lightly sighed.

“...This won’t do anything,” she mumbled.

“I wonder. We don’t know that yet.”

“I’m sure I’ll do the deed myself once my watcher is gone, you know.”

“Nope. I won’t allow it.”

“You don’t have to. Because you’ll be dead by then.”

Hajikano came straight for me like she was crashing into me. I smelled the sweet scent of her hair. Her body was cold with sweat.

She cried, keeping her voice low. The front of my shirt got soaking wet with her tears. While she cried, I kept stroking her back.

“Even if it’s a lie, can you promise me something?”, I whispered in her ear. “Even if I go away, keep living.”

“I can’t.”

“There’s no need to seriously vow it. A lie’s fine.”

“...Then it’s a lie, but I promise.”

Hajikano looked up from my chest and extended the pinky on her right hand.

And we made a pinky promise in name only.

On our way back, we heard the sound of a ringing public phone many times. Just as one seemed to stop, another phone in a different location started. Sometimes there was the sound of a phone in places where it seemed like there couldn’t possibly be one. Hajikano gripped my hand tightly every time.

“Hey, Hinohara.”

“What?”

“If you change your mind, kill me anytime.”

“Right. If I change my mind.”

“I won’t mind being killed by you.”

“I understand.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I know.”

“I’d be happy if you kissed me at the end.”

“Right. If that happens.”

“Great. I can’t wait.”

We innocently walked home as the sound of ill-omened phones echoed through the night.

Chapter 12: The Mermaid's Song

The evening of August 27th, Hajikano and I headed for the site of the Minagisa summer festival. She wore a yukata she'd only worn once three years ago, and I wore a cheap jinbei I bought in the area. We walked down the dim rural roads, our clogs resounding under the voices of higurashi. Thanks to her deep blue yukata, Hajikano's white skin stood out more than ever.

The closer we got to the festival, the more we heard taiko drums rumbling the earth, the sound of flutes and sho, guiding voices on megaphones, and the stirring of people. There was a long line of cars outside the local elementary school designated for parking, and just ahead of there, we could see the community plaza.

Just as we were stepping in, a small firework went up to announce the start of the festival. Everyone around stopped at once and looked up to the sky, gazing at the white smoke left behind. Just after, the area was filled with applause.

In the center of the plaza was a scaffold, and strings of lanterns extended radially from the pillar. Stands were packed close together along the long sides of the plaza, one of the short sides served as an entrance, and the other short side had a giant stage set up. A few dozen or hundred people were already seated, and the head festival runner was up on stage giving a greeting.

I opened the program given to me at the entrance and went over the plans for today. As expected, the reading of The Mermaid of Agohama and the singing of the Mermaid's Song were still there. They must have found a replacement. It was only natural, I guess. In the corner of the program was a photo of this year's Miss Minagisa.

She was a pretty woman, certainly, but seemed too lively to suit the part of the mermaid - of course, maybe I only thought that because I knew that role had been for Chigusa.

We bought usuyaki and yakisoba at the stands and went to the stage. There, we saw a children's iai performance, a middle school wind instrument band, buyo and minyou dances by volunteers, and spinning tricks by a performer. An hour went by in a blink. As a raffle started up, we left our seats, waded through the crowd, sat on a planter near the parking lot, and observed the hubbub of the festival from a distance.

As Miss Minagisa's reading was about to begin, I felt something cold on the back of my hand. I thought it was just my imagination, but seeing Hajikano look to the sky, I knew I hadn't been the only one to feel it. Less than a minute later, it began to rain. It wasn't intense, but it was enough to get you soaked if you weren't paying attention. Everyone took shelter in tents or the community center, or ran to the parking lot; the people on the plaza scattered at once. In no time, a voice on a megaphone announced that the stage shows would be canceled.

Hajikano and I hid from the rain under the community center's overhang. The thin raindrops blurred the lights of lanterns and stands, dying the plaza a dark red. Girls running with carpets held above their heads, old people walking pitifully with umbrellas up, children running around without regard for the rain, merchants hastily putting away their stands - as I watched it absentmindedly, a voice suddenly hit my ears.

The Mermaid's Song.

I didn't hear it from the stage, but from right beside me.

I looked Hajikano in the eye. She smiled shyly and stopped

singing. “The rain doesn’t seem like it’ll stop soon,” she said to cover her embarrassment.

“It’s fine, keep going,” I told her.

She nodded and resumed singing.

Her voice soaked into the air filled with rain.

This was my third time hearing her sing the Mermaid’s Song.

The second time was a month ago, on the roof of the hotel.

The first time was six years ago, at an abandoned shrine on a mountain.

*

It was back when I still called Hajikano “class president.”

The summer of 1988 was in one way my worst summer, and in another way my best summer. As I mentioned once before, that summer I’d fallen victim to autonomic ataxia, and had chills so bad I had to stay under a down blanket in the middle of the day in July. The coldness got worse day by day, ultimately hindering my everyday life. Going to a university hospital that was a three-hour round trip even using buses and trains, I was examined, and it was judged to be a result of stress (which was obvious). The doctor said I needed periodic hospital visits and a long recuperation. And thus my summer vacation started early.

It was unlike any summer I knew. There was such a gap between what I saw and what I felt, everything seemed somehow less real. Even though I’d been given a long break, I didn’t have any will to go outside and play - for that matter, I couldn’t even focus on reading inside. I feel like most of my time was spent watching a video tape on repeat. I forget what the video was. I only remember

it was some old foreign film.

Once exactly a week had passed since I stopped coming to school, as I was watching the TV in my room as usual, I heard a knock on the door. The knock had a strange amount of force, not too strong, not too weak, low-tempo and musical in a way that just barely kept itself consecutive. I'd never heard such a polite knock before. I was sure it wasn't my mother knocking.

"Who is it?", I asked them. The door slowly opened, and a girl with a cute white one-piece appeared. She shut the door without making a sound, then turned back to me and bowed her head.

"The class president?" I sat up, forgetting the cold. "What are you here for?"

"Visiting." Hajikano smiled at me, let down her backpack, and sat next to my futon. "And also, to bring the handouts you've been missing."

I hastily looked at the state of my room. I'd gotten out of the habit of cleaning since no friends had come into my room in months, so it was a mess. If I'd only known she was coming, I would have gotten it nice and neat, I lamented. Then I looked at myself and felt even gloomier. Hajikano was dressed so sharply, she could walk right into her graduation, but I looked pathetic, wearing an unmatching jacket over creased pajamas.

I dove back under the covers to escape her gaze.

"Did a teacher ask you?"

"No, I proposed it myself. Since I was curious how you were doing, Yosuke."

She took a clear file out of her backpack, neatly took out the folded B3-size papers, checked what was printed on them, and put them on my desk. Then she sat next to me again, and looked at me

as if to say “now then.” Here come the questions, I thought. Why do you keep not coming to school? Why are you wrapped in a down blanket when it’s summer? What kind of sickness is it? Why did you catch it?

But contrary to my expectations, Hajikano didn’t ask anything. She took out a notebook with her name and class written on the front, opened it where I could see, and started going over the relatively high-importance information from the past week’s lessons.

What was the meaning of this?, I wondered, but I obediently listened to her. Within minutes, I was deeply engrossed in what she was saying. New knowledge being told to me from a live human mouth. That was the sort of stimulation I needed most after spending entire days in my room.

Once she was done, Hajikano put her notebook in her backpack, said “I’ll come again,” and left. As soon as she was gone, my mom came into the room without knocking.

“Well, isn’t that nice of her to visit. You should cherish friends like that,” she said with pleasure.

“She’s not a friend,” I sighed. “She’s the class president, so she’s nice to everyone.”

I wasn’t just saying that to cover up my embarrassment like boys my age often would. The relationship between Hajikano and me back then simply wasn’t such that you could call us “friends.” As of moving up to fourth grade, her seat was closer, so we talked more, but that was it; it was limited to the classroom, and ever since we changed seats at the start of June, we didn’t talk much at all.

I was honestly happy about Hajikano coming to visit me when I

was sick, and deeply grateful for her going over the lessons I'd missed, but thinking that she probably did it out of sympathy depressed me. Because really, she was "the class president" who "had to be nice" to "a poor classmate." Surely she only saw me as a weakling to pity.

The next day, and the day after, Hajikano knocked at about the same time. And she thoroughly went over the lessons for the day. I thought her good will to do so could be largely interpreted as just fulfilling her duties as a class president. But as she paid frequent visits to my room to do everything she could for me, there was certainly a part of me that couldn't help being captivated. If it weren't for my belief that her kindness only came from pity, I think I would have been totally smitten in a few days.

At the time, I had a self-awareness of my love that could easily be called bizarre for a fourth-grader. If it were a month or two earlier, I would probably have a vague choking feeling, but not be able to figure out what it was. But since starting to think of my birthmark as ugly, my personality became extremely introspective. When I had time, I would mentally go over all these things I had just sort of accepted before, examine them, give them proper names, and put them back where they were. Love was one thing I found through this re-examining process.

Every time Hajikano finished going over the day's lessons and left, I felt a terribly miserable feeling. The big problem was, just as she expected to happen, *I was very much soothed by her*. Even though she was only being nice to me out of pity, my heart legitimately trembled at her smile and her slightest actions, and I couldn't be more miserable about that. Wanting her to think of me as someone who understood things quickly, I secretly did lesson

prep with the textbook, and I excitedly cleaned my room around the time school got out - and I was so embarrassed with myself for doing it. I decided to take as blunt an attitude as I could with Hajikano, to at least counter it somewhat. So it wouldn't feel lonely when she eventually stopped coming.

Please, don't show me any weird dreams, I thought. I can't have it anyway, so don't let it into my sight. Stop toying with people with the pretense of being conscientious. But Hajikano didn't know about those thoughts, so she innocently held my hand and smiled "your hand's nice and cold, Yosuke," and lay down next to me to give detailed explanations of diagrams in her notebook. And so my chills got steadily worse.

July 13th was dedicated to a school-wide cleanup of the whole campus. All day, I could hear kids making a clamor outside. There didn't seem to be any classes that day, so I figured Hajikano wouldn't come teach me anything. But at 4 PM, I started to get fidgety, then the doorbell rang as usual, and there was a knock on my door.

That day, Hajikano wore cut-and-sew clothes of white fabric and a calm light green skirt. The uniform for the cleanup day was gym clothes, so maybe she went back home to change her dirty clothes, I thought.

"What is it?", I asked. "There weren't any classes today, were there?"

"Nope. But I'm here." Hajikano smirked mischievously.

"For what?"

"Just visiting."

Hajikano sat by my bedside like usual, smiling at my face

without doing anything in particular. I couldn't stand it and flipped over in bed.

"You don't have to come on a day like this, do you?"

"I guess it's become a habit. And I'm worried for you, Yosuke."

I believe I was very happy to hear those words. And thus I chastised myself for getting elated, and blurted out something thorny.

I turned back around and said to Hajikano:

"Liar. You just like yourself for being nice to me."

I thought she'd bluntly deny it.

I thought she wouldn't even pay it any mind.

I thought she'd laugh it off. "Yosuke, you dummy."

But Hajikano didn't say anything.

She tightly pursed her lips and stared into my eyes. She had an expression like a long needle was being slowly pushed into her.

After a few seconds, Hajikano came to her senses and blinked, then tried to smile. But it was certainly an awkward one.

With an expression hard to pin down the emotion of, she mumbled.

"...That one really hurt."

She slowly stood up, turned her back to me, and left the room without a goodbye.

Initially, I hardly felt any sort of guilt. I even felt proud for hitting upon Hajikano's sore spot and getting her to run. But as time passed, the haziness in my chest grew thicker. It gradually covered the entire room, tormenting my heart inside and out.

Had I perhaps been making a terrible mistake?

If Hajikano really were using me for the sake of self-satisfaction, then no matter what I said, she could easily ignore it or

refute it. Hypocrites generally establish a way to retaliate when their good will is questioned. They're well aware of how to act to seem saintly, and keep on hiding their true intentions. That's how it goes. Especially if it's someone smart.

But Hajikano seemed hurt by me calling her out on it.

Was that proof that she saw me as an equal?

Did she feel betrayed because she wasn't showing sympathy as a hypocrite, but from her heart?

If that were the case, then I'd done a terrible thing to Hajikano, who was doing so much for me.

I kept worrying all evening in my futon.

...I need to apologize to her.

My heart became set on that as of the next morning.

I felt like I couldn't convey my feelings well over the phone. When the noon bell rang, I got a duffel coat from my bureau and put it on over a thick sweater. My whole body smelled of bug spray. In the coat pocket were tissues and candy from last winter.

It had been a while since I went outside by myself. In fact, leaving out the "by myself," it had been a week. Being in a gloomy room for so long, the sky's blue and the trees' green, the sun's brightness and the smell of grass, the cicadas' buzz and the birds' chirping - it all felt more intense than I remembered it. Was the world always such a stimulating place?, I thought at a loss. I pulled my coat together as if to protect myself, put my hood all the way up, and took my first step on the path to school.

I purposefully chose a weird time to leave the house so I could avoid being seen as much as possible. My aim was spot on; I didn't see a single grade schooler on the road to school besides me. I

prayed I could get to school without seeing anybody.

I passed a number of adults, and they looked at me dubiously, but luckily I made it to school without meeting anyone my age. I looked up at the clock tower; it was just about lunch time.

The school seemed a little more formal than usual after not being there in a while. I put my head down and quickly walked to my classroom. I looked through the open door, but didn't see Hajikano inside. I reluctantly went inside and asked some girls talking in the corner where she was. While they were suspicious of my getup, they told me Hajikano was absent today because she wasn't feeling well.

Disappointed, I left the classroom. Just then, I finally noticed the existence of a few dozen photos put up on the bulletin board in the hall. I had my head lowered the first time, so I didn't see them at all.

The first one I looked at was a photo of Hajikano. It was an extremely well-taken photo, so I stopped and stared at it for a while.

The photos seemed to be from a race, a class event in May. Each one was numbered, and you could write the number of the photo you wanted on an envelope to buy it. If I had to guess, it was probably targeted toward parents who came for teacher conferences.

I searched for photos with Hajikano, looking at them in order. The photographer was probably trying to get as many students as possible without bias, but Hajikano clearly showed up more often than any others. Photographers unconsciously choose subjects that make a good picture, after all. I always think that when I watch TV, too. For instance, photos of a school are taken in a priority hierachy,

starting with “a particularly child-like child,” followed by “a pretty girl,” then “a serious kid about to respond to a question.” And subjects that are likely to cause viewers discomfort are cleverly pushed out of frame.

While looking to see if there were any pictures that showed Hajikano closer-up, I unintentionally found a photo containing myself. It was a complete sneak attack. I wasn’t prepared, expecting there to be not a single one.

Thinking about it now, it was a miracle photo, taken by coincidence. Not in the sense that the photo came out well, of course. I mean it was a *miraculously awful* photo. It was like a repulsive deep-sea creature.

No matter how pretty the people, sometimes you get photos like this. Especially when snapping in the middle of quick face movement; no one beautiful is perfectly beautiful at all possible moments. Sometimes you get photos that look like you’re ten or twenty years older, or gained 20 or 40 pounds. As for me, having the devastating feature that was my birthmark, that took full effect to make the worst possible photo. Normally the photographer should have taken out such a photo, but maybe it slipped in by mistake.

Young girls can foolishly base their self-image upon a miraculously well-taken photo. My self-image instantly changed based on this miraculously awful photo.

Ahh, so this is how my face looks to others.

I looked at the photos of Hajikano, then back at the photo of me. And I asked myself. Do you think you two fit each other? Do you think you’re in any equal position to talk with her? Do you think you have the right to love her? The answer to all of those was, “I

don’t.”

My legs shook like the ground had shifted under me. I managed to stop myself from falling, but a stronger chill than I’d ever felt before struck my body. I shivered all over, and had trouble breathing.

I ran home with my tail between my legs, curled up in my futon, and waited for the shaking to stop. My heart felt like it was beaten to the ground; it seemed I was made as weak as I could possibly be. Finally the chills receded, and I crawled out, got some water from the dim kitchen, and went straight back to the futon.

How long would I have to live like this?, I thought, face buried in my pillow. Even if these chills went away, the fundamental problem of my birthmark wouldn’t. It wouldn’t change that I’d have to keep hiding from people’s sight.

Please, someone, get rid of this birthmark, I prayed. But I didn’t know what I was praying to. If they could grant this wish, I didn’t care if they were a god, a witch, a mermaid, whatever.

This was when I remembered the abandoned shrine.

It was some idle gossip I talked about with one of my classmates one day. A little abandoned shrine at the top of a small mountain on the outskirts of town. If you went there at night and made a wish right at midnight, the god of the shrine would appear and grant your wish - a ridiculous rumor. It had come from seemingly nowhere, but the same claim was made even by students from other schools. A few young teachers had heard of it when they were kids, too. So the rumor of the abandoned shrine always caught the interest of Minagisa children as a ridiculous but not-fully-deniable mystery.

That said, for a fourth-grader to earnestly believe in a fantasy

story about an abandoned shrine's god granting your wish... it was difficult to imagine. But my vision being constricted by a long time indoors, and my head fogged up from my illness, and having just been knocked into the depths of despair to boot, I was in the mood to grasp at straws. So that gossip echoed like a revelation to me.

I thought about that rumor for a while from under my futon. After about an hour, I sat up, put my wallet in my coat pocket, and left the house. The time was about 4 PM.

I needed to use the bus to get to the shrine. Luckily, I knew which stop to get on at. I remembered, while taking the bus to the hospital in the town over with my mom, passing by the mountain which the shrine was on.

Twenty minutes after arriving at the bus stop, the bus came. There was only a single old couple on board. Once they got off two stops later, I was the only passenger left.

While waiting to arrive at my destination, I sat at the edge of the far back seat, looking at the monotone fields going by. The road seemed in poor shape, as the bus frequently jolted unpleasantly. The driver muttered in a voice so quiet I couldn't hear it. It hadn't been thirty minutes since I got on the bus, but it felt like two, even three hours. Sometimes, when I saw unfamiliar houses, I got worried that I'd taken the wrong bus. Once I saw the mountain with the shrine, I was relieved and pushed the disembark button.

As I put my ticket and the fare in the box, the driver looked at me dubiously.

"You alone, kid?"

I tried to respond casually. "Yes. Actually, my granny should be here at the bus stop to pick me up..." I glanced toward the stop and

purposefully sighed. “It seems like she isn’t here yet. Maybe she forgot?”

“You gonna be okay on your own?”, the driver, who looked around fifty, asked with concern.

“It’s fine. Granny’s house is close to here.”

The driver nodded understandingly. “Alright. Take care.”

Once the bus left, I pulled my coat hood over my eyes and began walking toward the shrine. I soon found the signboard marking the entrance to the mountain. According to the sign, its elevation was only about 300 meters.

Starting to climb the mountain, the paved road quickly ended, and there was just a gravel road so thin that one person could just barely squeeze through. The branches of the trees along the path stuck out everywhere, making it hard to walk, and some fallen trees blocked the path. On the fallen trees grew mold and unfamiliar reddish-green mushrooms, so I was careful not to touch them as I climbed over.

Finally, as I made it up to about the middle point, rain began to fall with no prior indication. The tree leaves served as umbrellas, so despite the sound, not many drops fell. But as the rain grew stronger, it poured down on me alongside all the rain that had been kept up in the leaves beforehand.

After coming so far, I was reluctant to admit that it would be best to turn back there, so I ran up the mountain. But the path was much, much longer than I anticipated. At the time, I mistakenly thought that paths up mountains were a straight shot from the base to the summit. By the time I reached the torii at the shrine entrance, my melton duffel coat was twice as heavy from all the rainwater it soaked up.

I pried open a poorly-fit door with both hands and escaped into the shrine's main building. As soon as I sat on the floor and relaxed, I got an intense chill. I stripped off my drenched coat, leaned on the wall, and shivered holding my knees. It would be impossible to wait until midnight in this condition. But going down the mountain and waiting at the bus stop for the next bus was about as suicidal.

Mixed with the sound of raindrops on the roof, I heard water dripping here and there inside the building as well. There seemed to be some leaks. The water dripping through the ceiling gradually covered the floor, sapping my body heat. The frigid floor and my helplessness worsened my shaking. My teeth chattered, my limbs were numb to the core, and I felt like I would freeze to death, in July no less.

I shouldn't have come to this place, I regretted. But it was too late. I hadn't told anyone where I was going. No help would come for me. The bus driver probably thought I was at my grandma's house, having a nice friendly dinner. How nice it would be if that were true.

Probably about three or four hours passed. I realized the sound of the rain had lessened. I heard the sound of drips falling from one leaf onto another like a reverberation, but perhaps the rain itself had stopped. It was pitch dark inside the building, and I couldn't even see my own hands.

My stamina was at rock bottom. I felt like I couldn't take another step. My senses were faint, and I could hardly remember who I was or why I was here. The only certain things were the chills and my trembling body.

I heard a knock on the door. It was a familiar knock, but I couldn't consciously remember when and where I'd heard it. After a little bit, the sliding door opened, and my vision was filled with light. I was this close to being afraid, but when I saw it was someone coming in with a flashlight, my body went limp with relief.

"So you were here."

It was a girl's voice. That voice, too, seemed familiar. I looked up and tried to identify her, but the flashlight she was shining on me was too bright, I couldn't keep my eyes open.

She closed her umbrella and shook off the water, walked over to me, stooped over, and pointed the flashlight at the floor. Then finally, I could see the face of the person who came to get me.

"Yosuke," Hajikano said. "It's me."

I rubbed my eyes. Why was Hajikano here? How did she know I was here? No, why was she looking for me in the first place? Hadn't she not come to school because she was sick? Did she climb the mountain alone? In the middle of the night?

I didn't even have the vitality left to ask those questions. Seeing how weak I was, Hajikano put a hand on my shoulder and said "Wait here, I'll call for help," then went to leave with the umbrella and flashlight.

I reflexively went after Hajikano and grabbed her hand. Stopping her, I strained my voice with teeth chattering.

"It's cold."

Hajikano turned around and looked at my hand, then briefly hesitated. Should she let go and call for help, or stay here with me for now?

Ultimately, she chose the latter. Putting down the umbrella and flashlight, she grabbed my hand back and squatted down.

Relieved that she decided to stay, I fell on my bottom.

“You’re cold?”, she asked to confirm.

I nodded, and she put her arms around my back and brought her body close.

“Stay still.” She patted my back affectionately. “You’ll warm up slowly.”

Initially, her soaking wet body felt very cold. Stop it, I thought, you’ll just make me even colder. But soon, that coldness numbed a little bit at a time. And I began to feel heat from within her skin. My coldly stiffened muscles loosened up from the heat, and my various lost bodily functions gradually resumed. My body, cold to the core, regained a normal human-like temperature over a long time.

“It’s okay,” Hajikano kept repeating while warming me up. “It’ll be okay.”

Every time she spoke, I felt strongly encouraged. If she said it would be okay, it probably would be, I thought with all honesty.

I wonder how long it went on for.

Suddenly, I realized my body’s senses had returned to normal. I felt the normal temperature of a July night. My skin was a little cold because of my wet clothes, but that was it.

Seeming to notice my shaking had calmed down, Hajikano asked, “Are you still cold?”

I wasn’t cold anymore. I was sweating, even. Yet I replied, “Just a little.” I wanted to feel her warmth for a little longer.

“Ah... I hope you warm up soon.”

Whether she saw through my lie or not, Hajikano stroked my face.

After being warmed up to the core, I softly released my arms

from her.

“Class president,” I said.

“What?”

“Sorry.”

With that one word, she guessed what I was trying to say.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said happily. “I mean, to tell the truth, it is kind of on my mind still. You really injured me, Yosuke. That’s for sure. But I’ll forgive you.”

“...Thanks.”

Hajikano ruffled my head with her hands.

“Hey, Yosuke. I visited you every day because I wanted you to come back to school.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” She bent her head and smiled. “Um, Yosuke, you might not realize, but I like talking with you. I like just listening to you talk, and I like you just listening to me talk. I also like it when you’re there and we don’t say anything. And when you go, I’m really lonely.”

She stopped there and took a breath, then drooped her head and spoke weakly.

“So don’t disappear on me. ...I was worried, you know?”

“Sorry.”

It took all I had just to say that.

We went outside, but it was just as dark as inside. The rain had completely stopped, the clouds cleared, and the moon was out, but it seemed like it’d be difficult to walk down the mountain right now. Even if we did go down, the bus wouldn’t come until tomorrow morning. Ultimately, we stayed the night at the abandoned shrine.

I still remember it clearly even now. The many names of stars Hajikano taught me, sitting and pointing at the night sky. I didn't understand half of what she was explaining at the time, but every time she spoke one of the names, which felt almost like magic incantations, my body was filled with a strange energy.

"Come to think of it, didn't you take the day off school since you were sick?", I asked. "Are you feeling okay?"

"It's fine. I was lying about not feeling well. Really, I was just sad about what you said."

"My bad. I apologize."

"I forgive you." Her eyes narrowed in a smile. "...Anyway, I was lazing around at home, when your parents called asking if their son was staying over at my house. So I knew you had left the house to go somewhere."

"But how did you know I was here?"

"Do you remember when we were talking back in spring, and I mentioned this shrine once?"

I instinctively clapped my hands together. "Oh, yeah..."

"I thought you didn't like such unrealistic stories, so I was surprised when you got interested in the rumor about the shrine. That left an impression on me. When I heard you were gone, I suddenly remembered that, and thought, maybe..."

"What would you have done if I wasn't here?"

"Wait until midnight and wish, "I hope Yosuke will be okay.""

Once out of things to say, Hajikano stood up and whistled a song. A melancholic, but somehow nostalgic melody. The Mermaid's Song. I had never witnessed her singing it by herself before, so I was at a loss for words from the sheer beauty of her singing. Her voice reminded me of clear, cold water in the bottom

of a well. Once she was done, I applauded, and she laughed.

After that, we stared at the night sky for a long time without saying a word. “Let’s go back inside,” Hajikano eventually said. We went in, lay down on the floor, traded some meaningless words, and the flashlight which she’d left on gradually grew weaker. Soon, the battery ran out, and the room was pitch black. We grabbed each other’s hands, neither of us necessarily being first, and waited for morning to come.

With this day, my world took on a whole new meaning. A world made up of “me” and “everything else” became a world of “me,” “Hajikano,” and “everything else.” And Hajikano alone gave me proof that this world was a place worth living in.

People may laugh it off as something akin to imprinting. Like a newborn bird thinking the first thing it sees is its mother. From an outside perspective, it may be I was a fool forever imprisoned in childhood memories. But I didn’t care what anyone said. I would probably be a happy slave to these memories until the day I died.

Chapter 13: The Place You Called From

Time passed in a blink, and before I knew it, it was the deadline of the bet, August 31st.

It was pouring rain from early in the morning. Appropriately bad weather for my last day, I thought, looking out the window. The weather report said it would rain all over the country all day. The TV showed a crowd of people with umbrellas at a scramble crossing in the city, and read out the estimated rainfall in each area.

Hajikano and I gave up on going outside and spent the day lying in the room, gazing at the rain from the porch, and watching disaster reports on TV. The fact that it was the last day is exactly why we didn't want to do anything special, just savor a meager but certain happiness.

In the evening, while listening to a record on a turntable found in the closet, Hajikano crept up and covered my back. Her hands came around to my chest, holding a fruit knife.

"Hey, Hinohara. I really enjoyed these ten days," she said. "It was really like a dream. When I lay down at night and turned off the light, I kept thinking, "maybe this is a dream I'm having unconscious after my suicide attempt." I was worried that the next time I woke up, I'd be in a hospital, all alone. ...But when I woke up in the morning and opened the screen, you were always there. And I was so happy to know it wasn't a dream, and that alone almost made me cry."

Hajikano stopped there.

"...So please," she said pleadingly, putting the knife in my hand.

I refused it, and she pouted. "Mean."

I took the knife from her hands and put it back in the kitchen. When I returned to the closet, Hajikano was lying down there.

She looked up at me and asked, “Do you not like seeing blood?”

“I dunno,” I dodged.

“I don’t mind strangling.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“That way, I’ll be able to feel your warmth to the end.”

“I think you’ve already felt it plenty these past few days.”

“Absolutely not. And it’s not a matter of how much.”

“Greedy, huh.”

“That I am. You just realized?” She smiled.

This was when I finally noticed that the crying mole under her eye was gone. I got up close to her to look at her face and make sure it wasn’t a mistake.

So that mole wasn’t real after all. Hajikano had been seeking my help all along, with that distress signal she thought up in grade school.

“What’s wrong?”, Hajikano asked, blinking.

I hesitated for how to reply, but after a few breaths, only said “Nothing, it was just my imagination.” Now, I was Yuuya Hinohara. Talking about the crying mole would be bizarre. That was within Yosuke Fukamachi’s jurisdiction - and he would never appear before Hajikano ever again.

Looking at her at close range, Hajikano closed her eyes as if expecting something. I parted her bangs and lightly flicked her forehead. She opened her eyes and turned away with dissatisfaction. It was such a childish reaction, my face broke into a smile.

After dinner, I went to look outside, and the rain had become a light drizzle. We notified Yoshie reading the evening paper in her lounge chair and left the house. As I took an umbrella from the rack, she stopped my hand and shook her head. One was enough, she was saying.

We put our shoulders together under one umbrella, slowly walking to a coast about twenty minutes from the house. By the time we saw the light of a small lighthouse, the rain had completely stopped. We sat on the edge of the bank, listening to the sound of the waves.

“Hinohara,” she said to me. “To tell the truth, there’s something I need to apologize for.”

“What do you mean?”

She took a deep breath before answering.

“Last night, I finished reading my diary.”

I looked at her face dumbfounded. “...Why would you do that? Didn’t you decide to stop remembering?”

“I’m sorry.”

She lowered her head and gripped the edge of her skirt with her hands.

“Well, what did it say?”, I asked.

Hajikano hesitated to answer that question for a long time.

I forced myself not to face the water, patiently waiting for her to start talking.

And finally, she broke the silence.

“Hinohara. Right now, I like you to a hopeless degree. But before I lost my memory, it seems that wasn’t the case. At least until that moment she leapt into the sea, *Yui Hajikano loved Yosuke*

Fukamachi.”

Her words turned my world upside-down.

My mouth hung open.

She continued. “According to my diary, I attempted suicide another time in the middle of July. At a shrine park near my high school, I tried to hang myself. Yosuke was the one who saved me.”

Then Hajikano pointed below her eye.

“Did you notice my crying mole here was a fake?”

I wordlessly nodded.

“This is a signal that only makes sense between Yui Hajikano and Yosuke Fukamachi. Like a distress signal, kind of. When you’re hurting, but it’s difficult to be honest about wanting help, you draw a mole under your eye to signal it. That’s what we decided.”

She put her hand under her eye and ran her finger down her cheek, like showing the path of a tear.

“Even after we went to separate middle schools, I would draw a mole under my eye when I wanted help, like it was a good luck charm. I kept that habit even after I lost my memory; not even knowing why I was doing it, after getting out of the bath or washing my face, every day I would mark under my eye with a marker. ...So when I got to high school and found Yosuke Fukamachi’s name on the class roster, I felt like I was ascending to heaven. “Ahh, so Yosuke really came to save me.””

“But,” I interrupted. “But Fukamachi was saying then that Hajikano seemed to hate him.”

“Right. It’s not that I hated him, but it’s true I was trying to keep my distance,” Hajikano said. “Because after that horrible incident, I couldn’t look him in the eye. And I wanted Yosuke to just remember me as I was in grade school. I didn’t want the memories

of our time together being overwritten by seeing me in my shameful present state. ...For better or worse, Yosuke had an accident during spring break and was three months late to start school. So I was able to stay away from him for then."

She glanced toward me to see my reaction, then faced forward once more.

"When I met Yosuke again months later, I was really surprised. The birthmark that covered the right side of his face had cleanly vanished. When I saw him, I thought, "I don't want to burden him." If he knew the misery of my life, dutiful Yosuke would surely throw away everything to come to my aid. But I didn't want to interfere with his life like that, when he was free from the prejudice over his birthmark. So I resisted taking the hand he extended to me, and kept refusing him."

"...I think Fukamachi would be glad to know that," I said.

Hajikano grinned.

"As much distance as I put between us, Yosuke followed after me. He even clearly stated his fondness for me. I tried to bluntly push him away every time, but... truthfully, I was so happy, I didn't know what to do with myself. The thought that he was still thinking about me like this made my head spin with joy. But responding to his affection felt like fooling him, so I refrained. And I felt like there must be a girl much more fitting for Yosuke now than me."

"But ultimately, you ended up stargazing together," I appended.

"I'm so weak-willed," Hajikano said self-derisively. "In the end, I gave into temptation and started going with Yosuke to see the stars every night. In my heart, I told myself excuses. "I'm about to kill myself soon, so can't I dream a little at the end?""

“And then you met me and Chigusa.”

“Right. ...Honestly, at first I didn’t like giving up my time alone with Yosuke. But once we talked, I found that you and Chigusa were really great people, and I came to like you in no time. Only, Chigusa seemed to be interested in Yosuke, so I was always on edge watching them. Of course, I didn’t let it show. Chigusa was pretty with almost no flaws and had an honest personality, so I thought she would have taken Yosuke from me soon enough.”

Hajikano looked up at the night sky and sighed.

“It’s strange, isn’t it. Just a while ago, I was trying to keep Yosuke away, but now I couldn’t help but feel regretful if someone else took him away. Even though I should have been supporting their relationship. ...That said, other than that, our days together were really wonderful. All three of you were at a comfortable distance where you’d turn away but let me hold your hand, so I was free to relax.”

“...If that’s the case, then why did you have to jump in the sea?”

She bowed her head and smiled worriedly. “I couldn’t forgive myself for enjoying my life. It seemed wrong for someone who left two girls to die to be having such a wonderful youth. And yet, I kept desiring more and more happiness. I especially wished to get Yosuke back from Chigusa. I came to hate all of that about myself, so I jumped into the sea.”

Her story seemed to end there. Hajikano looked at my face, and awaited my response to the whole thing.

Once my head was in order, I asked her.

“Do you still love Fukamachi now?”

“Yes,” she nodded without hesitation. “I still love Yosuke. I’ve

lost my memory, but reading my diary, it hit me. “Ahh, I do love this person.” ...But it was a “love” that sat on the same line as affection shown to family and siblings. And different from the “love” I have for you, Hinohara. Because the first time I truly fell in love was the moment when you visited me in the hospital and embraced me.”

With that, Hajikano leaned against me and hugged me.

Even I didn’t know how I should feel.

In a sense, everything I had done up to now was completely off the mark.

In a sense, nothing I had done up to now was wrong in the slightest.

Something like that, surely.

*

But the story didn’t end here.

That night, I met the witch.

*

When I woke up, the first thing I did was check the time. It seemed like I’d fallen asleep. Hajikano was leaning against my shoulder and sleeping, faintly breathing. My watch said it was 11:56 PM.

Though the bet would be up in less than five minutes, I was calm enough that even I found it strange. Maybe I had experienced enough happiness in these ten days for nearly a lifetime. So there was no need for hastiness. I couldn’t decisively say there was nothing left undone, but to ask any more than this would be a

luxury. Considering it was my life, you could call it complete.

I was glad Hajikano was asleep. If I vanished before she woke up, she wouldn't have to experience the decisive moment. Like a cat vanishing from its owner before it's about to die, I felt it would be good to die quietly while Hajikano didn't notice.

I stared at the second hand on the watch. The red hand relentlessly brought today toward tomorrow, second by second. It seemed like I would be in a staring contest with the numbers to the end at this rate, so I took off the watch and threw it into the sea. Then I laid Hajikano on the ground careful not to wake her, and quietly walked to the edge of the bank.

Time passed slowly. Less than five minutes felt like ten or even twenty. They say that before death, your mental activity goes up as your life flashes before your eyes, so maybe it's something like that, I thought at first.

But it really was a *long* four minutes. It was like the length of a second increased with each one. Or else with each second forward, tomorrow moved a little further away. I even thought that at this rate, I might never reach tomorrow. Like Achilles chasing after a tortoise he could never catch forever.

Just then, I heard footsteps behind me.

I turned around thinking that Hajikano had woken up, and when I saw the person there, I gulped.

The surprising thing was, when suddenly faced with that revealed truth, I was hardly perturbed. No, not even that. Hard as it was to believe, from my own reaction, it seemed that maybe I had expected *her* to show up from the beginning, and was just waiting for it to happen.

Perhaps, from some time ago, I had considered the possibility.

The wind blew, and the ribbon of Minagisa First High's uniform swayed over her chest.

"It has been a while, Fukamachi," Chigusa said.

"Yeah. Long time no see, Ogiue," I responded with a wave.

Chigusa sat at the edge of the water and looked up at me.

"May I have a cigarette?"

I took a pack from my pocket, pulled out the last one, and handed it to Chigusa. She put it in her mouth, and I held the lighter to her face. Chigusa coughed from the bitter taste and knit her brow.

"It really doesn't taste good, does it."

I stood next to Chigusa and gazed at her outfit once more. No mistaking it, she was the Chigusa Ogiue I knew. Her voice, her body, her scent, her behavior, it was all as I remembered it.

But it was also she who was the "woman on the phone," who'd offered me a bet.

"Don't talk too loud," I said. "I don't want to wake up Hajikano."

"Not to worry, she will not wake until dawn," Chigusa said with conviction.

"Did you do something to Hajikano?"

"Hm. Who can say?", she answered vaguely. "Really though, Fukamachi, you weren't surprised at all to see me. Amazing."

Once I was sure Hajikano was sound asleep, I talked to Chigusa.

"They got a replacement Miss Minagisa."

"Yes, I'm aware," she nodded. "What was she like?"

"I only saw her photo, but she was pretty."

“Hmm.”

“Personally, though, I liked the previous one better.”

“Is that so. Hooray,” Chigusa raised her hands in delight.

I turned around again to make sure Hajikano wasn’t awake.

Then I got to the point.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand.”

“Only one? What is it?”

“What happened to the real Chigusa Ogiue? Or, *was there a real girl named Chigusa Ogiue at all?”*

“Rest easy,” Chigusa replied quickly, as if expecting the question. “The real Chigusa Ogiue you met in the hospital safely left two months after you. She is doing fine now, in a distant town. ...And just as you’ve imagined, the Chigusa Ogiue you reunited with in high school was no more than a fictitious character I played. No such girl existed from the start.”

“...I see. I’m relieved to hear that,” I nodded deeply. “Well, turn me to foam, drown me, do as you please.”

“Please, don’t rush things. We have gotten to meet again, after all.”

I shrugged. Even seeing the trick unveiled to me, I still had trouble believing this Chigusa was the same person as that woman on the phone. Their voices were different, of course. But that wasn’t all. Chigusa to me was a symbol of innocence and harmlessness, and the woman on the phone, a symbol of maliciousness and harmfulness. I had trouble linking the two together. Even if I knew it to be factual in my head.

“Fukamachi, when did you start to find me suspicious?”, Chigusa asked.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “But helping you with that

reading practice definitely did something."

"It really was just coincidence I was picked as Miss Minagisa," Chigusa laughed heartily. "Don't you think that's ironic? For me to play *the part of the mermaid*, of all things."

"Yeah. It's ironic, alright," I agreed. "Hey, Ogiue. Can I ask one more thing?"

"So you'll still call me that name," Chigusa smiled. "What is it?"

"Did you put me through all that irrational stuff for some deeper reason than just being a pest?"

"Yes, that's right." She slowly nodded. "I wanted, this time, to make The Little Mermaid have a happy ending."

"...I see."

A dry laugh came out of my mouth.

"Seems like that was a failure, though."

Then Chigusa tilted her head. "...How do you mean?"

"I mean it couldn't be a happy ending."

After an unnaturally long pause, Chigusa suddenly put her hands to her mouth and laughed.

"You're so sharp, Fukamachi, and yet so slow where it's most important."

"What's so funny?", I asked, taking offense.

Chigusa took a deep breath to calm herself, and wiped tears of laughter from her cheek.

I couldn't understand what Chigusa was saying at all.

She stood up tall, and made a ceremonious declaration.

"Congratulations, Fukamachi. You've won the bet."

*

Like I explained before, The Mermaid of Agohama was like a mix of the legend of Yaobikuni told in Fukui, and Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Mermaid. The story begins with a girl living in the little fishing village of Agohama eating the flesh of a mermaid her fisherman father caught without realizing what it was, and becoming immortal also without realizing it.

It was long, long ago.

For a few years after she ate the mermaid flesh, not a single person noticed the change to her body. It was very normal for growth to stop around her age, so even she never even thought that she had become immortal.

A decade later, everyone was astounded by her peculiar body. Compared to other girls her age, she was all too young-looking. White skin and glossy hair, just like a girl of fifteen or sixteen. And not only that. Ever since she ate the mermaid flesh, a difficult-to-describe charm radiated from the girl's body, even seeming as if she glowed slightly. Naturally, the young men of the village became entranced by her.

But after several decades, as others her age had their hair turning gray, the fact that she still showed no sign of aging began to feel definitely strange to the people of the village. There had simply been too few changes to her. It couldn't be dismissed as "liveliness" anymore. Was she really human?

Still more decades passed. By that time, most of the girl's friends had died. And though that much time had gone by, her body still showed no sign of age. She stood at the deaths of innumerable people, her heart worn down each time. When her last friend died, the girl decided to leave the village she was born in.

The girl became a Buddhist priestess, and went around the

country in pursuit of death. In her long journey, she acquired Buddhist powers, and came to use them to heal the sick and give help to the poor. But she never found a means to be freed from her eternal life. As overwhelmingly many days went by, she became unable to even remember her own name. And by the time she forgot her reason for traveling, by coincidence, she arrived in her hometown.

...Up to this point, you'd be right to say there's no real difference between The Mermaid of Agohama and Yaobikuni. To get more exact, the legend of Yaobikuni also existed in places besides Fukui. Depending on the region, the protagonist could be a rich man's daughter, or given the mermaid flesh by a mysterious man, but they all shared the point of an immortal girl becoming a Buddhist priestess, wandering the country, and arriving back home.

The legend of Yaobikuni ends with the girl finally dying after arriving home. But in The Mermaid of Agohama, this is where the story truly begins. Back in her home fishing village after centuries, exhausted from a life full of others' death, the girl cut off communication with people and decided to live in the sea. Yet when she saw people in trouble, she couldn't help extending a hand, so as she brought people from shipwrecks to shore and saved people from drowning, she came to be worshipped in the village as a god of the sea.

One night, the girl saved a young fisherman drowning in a storm. The fisherman was hardly conscious, but he thanked the girl and tightly grabbed her hand. With this incident, she fell in love with the fisherman many centuries younger than her. Every time he went fishing, her heart beat fast. At those moments, she really was a girl of sixteen again.

One day, a few years later, a young mermaid came to the girl. The mermaid said she sought the aid of her powers. The girl listened, and found that the mermaid had fallen in love with a human man. She said she would make any sacrifice to become a human and live with the man. Thinking of the young fisherman, the girl sympathized with the mermaid's plight, and turned her tail into human legs. Not knowing that the man the mermaid loved and the young fisherman *she* loved were one and the same.

As they parted, the mermaid said: "What am I thinking, falling in love with a fisherman of all things? Even though my mother was killed by a fisherman..." The girl had a thought. What if, perhaps, her "mother killed by a fisherman" was that mermaid my father caught? Was it her mother's flesh I ate back then?

When she found out the mermaid's love was for that young fisherman, the girl regretted her actions. But she couldn't interfere with the course of the mermaid's love. I ate her mother's flesh, so I have a duty to advocate for her happiness. That's the least I can do to atone.

And so the young fisherman and the mermaid were wedded. The two had a happy life. It seemed as if there wasn't any room for displeasure. But there was an ironic twist of fate. One day, the mermaid couldn't bear not to tell her husband everything about her, and revealed that she had once been a mermaid, not a human. This set the tragedy into motion. The fisherman had lost both his parents in a storm when he was young, and it was believed in the village at the time that storms were caused by the singing of mermaids. As a result, he had a deep hatred of mermaids.

Upon learning that his wife was a mermaid, the fisherman despaired and threw himself into the raging sea. The mermaid

jumped in to save him, but having lost her tail, she didn't even have the strength to carry him and swim. By the time the immortal girl came rushing over, they had long since drowned. The girl grieved, and decided to live alone at the bottom of the sea.

That was the gist of The Mermaid of Agohama.

But Chigusa made an addition.

"Then a few centuries passed, and while leaving the sea again after quite some time, the girl saved a drowning boy. The boy who felt somehow similar to that young fisherman, having some kind of thought, visited the beach near-daily afterward, and he began to weigh on the girl's heart. The boy came to love a certain girl, but feeling that he wasn't a suitable partner for her, seemed to keep those feelings in his chest. I want to help him, the girl thought. This time, I'll make it work. No mistakes like back then. I would make this boy's love succeed in the best possible way."

*

"*I win?*"

Chigusa nodded.

"Yes, that's right. You have surmounted many forms of adversity, marvelously ending up with a mutual love with Hajikano. Though it seems you haven't realized it yourself."

"What do you mean?", I said, my voice unconsciously raising. "That can't be right, can it? I mean, Hajikano..."

Chigusa interrupted. "Hajikano is not as slow as you think. She had long since seen that you were Yosuke Fukamachi assuming the name of Yuuya Hinohara."

I was too shocked to speak.

“Your long conversation earlier was a roundabout confession. She told you to your face that she had always loved you, and now loved you even more.” Chigusa shrugged. “Did you really not notice that?”

My legs buckled and I collapsed on the spot. Chigusa chuckled at my reaction.

“It was convenient for her as well to remain fooled. She hesitated to admit her affection to Fukamachi, but if it were “Yosuke Fukamachi as Yuuya Hinohara,” she could share her feelings without it weighing on her.”

I ran through my interactions with Hajikano in the past few days in my head.

That time... and that time... that that time...

Hajikano knew who I really was, and still accepted my affection?

I lay down face-up and put a hand over my face. “I was a fool.”

“Yes, you rather were,” Chigusa agreed.

“So basically, *everything was set up for me from the start?”*

“That’s correct.”

I pulled my hand away. “So then why did you take such roundabout actions? If you just wanted to make my love succeed, was there any point to removing my birthmark, any point to appearing before me as Chigusa Ogiue?”

“I wanted the two of you to experience every kind of hardship. Taking away your birthmark, your ultimate weapon which earned you Hajikano’s sympathy; borrowing the appearance of Chigusa Ogiue to shake your feelings; creating a situation where there was no salvation except by killing Hajikano - I wanted to have it proven that you could both overcome it all.”

“...I get it,” I said. “Come to think of it, that letter you sent mentioned “a way for both of us to survive.” Was that a trap?”

“Yes. Hajikano saw who you really were because you were constantly attending to her for ten days. If you had followed the letter and chosen to search for “the woman on the phone,” you would have very little time together, and it would have likely been impossible for her to realize who you really were by today.”

I was starting to accept it, but then a new doubt appeared. “But, that one time, you linked the calls to make an opportunity for me and Hajikano to talk, right? What was that about? Just on a whim?”

Chigusa scratched her cheek with a troubled look. “That was completely outside of my expectations. I did not imagine you would try to burn your face. I mean, there would have been no purpose to it. I was stunned, but at the same time, I rather admired it. I saw you really would go that far for Hajikano. In deference to that recklessness, I allowed you to talk on the phone for just ten minutes. ...By the way, do you have an ashtray?”

“Nope. Put it in here.”

I offered her the empty pack. She grinned, put the cigarette butt in her hand, then held it up to me. A moment later, the cigarette butt had turned into a white camellia. Unlike my magic tricks, there was probably no secret to this one. She handed me the flower with a cocky look. I held it to my nose; it had a faint sweet smell.

“Kind of a pity about Hinohara,” I said, looking at the flower. “He seemed pretty fond of Ogiue.”

“Is that a fact?” Chigusa put her hands together and her eyes widened. “But not to worry. By dawn, there won’t be anyone left

who remembers me."

"And I'm no exception?"

"Right. Aren't you glad?"

I didn't want to answer that question. I felt like I'd flat-out regret answering, whether I was honest or not.

"I've been fooling you all this time, haven't I?", Chigusa said peacefully. "I played the part of the fictitious "Chigusa Ogiue" smiling to myself with all these thoughts of "if I behave like this, surely it will shake Fukamachi's resolve." Feel free to be more angry."

"...Yeah, that might be true." I took my eyes off the camellia, stood up, and turned back to Chigusa. "But even so, I liked the time I spent with you. And I think maybe you might not have hated your time with me, either. Isn't that right?"

"...You hit where it hurts," Chigusa said, trying to conceal her emotion, and hit my chest with her forehead. "You really are a bad person, Fukamachi."

"We're in the same boat there," I said.

Chigusa raised her face and smiled sadly. "At first, I simply approached you to fulfill the role of testing your devotion. But half a month into performing as Chigusa Ogiue, I realized I was deeply enjoying the role. I was swallowed up by the fictional person I'd created. I got so into my part, I even forgot who I really was at times. The times I spent with you, Fukamachi, truly were as "Chigusa Ogiue," forgetting all my past. ...But, oh well. It's not my first experience with heartbreak. I can't be wounded by such things."

She parted from my chest, stood on the edge of the water with her back to it, looked up at the night sky, then turned back to me.

“I shall reveal one last secret from my bag of tricks. About the birthmark I removed from your face, Fukamachi. To tell the truth, it would have gone away with time from the start. I only slightly accelerated the time it took to do so. Practically the same as doing nothing.”

I thought for a bit, then shook my head. “That “slight acceleration” was really important. If I still had the birthmark at the time of our reunion, I think the relationship between me and Hajikano would be more codependent and destructive. So, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Chigusa smiled with her eyes shut. “...Now, Fukamachi. Even once I go, please don’t slack off. You still have one final job left to do.”

“One final job?”

Chigusa whispered something. As I brought my ear closer to make out what she was saying, she stood up and softly put her lips on my cheek.

After smiling with satisfaction over my surprise, Chigusa leapt from the edge of the water. I reflexively tried to grab her hand, but I didn’t make it in time. A moment later, I saw her land on the water. Not *in* the water, but *on*. Like there were an invisible one-centimeter floor above the water, she walked soundlessly on the surface. I stood there in amazement, seeing her off.

After walking about ten meters, she turned around.

“Goodbye, Fukamachi. I’d never had such a fun summer before. My one regret has been settled, so now I can finally put an end to myself.”

Immediately after, a gust of wind blew, so strong that I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

When the wind stopped and I opened my eyes again, Chigusa

had vanished.

*

The horizon was dyed orange, and I saw a faint yellow-green on the boundary with the deep blue sky. Early-morning higurashi buzzed and sparrows chirped, and the outlines of things gradually became clear. The white rays of the sun drew a boundary line along the sea which sparkled in the morning sun, perpendicular to the horizon. A morning calm came to heat up the ground, and the wind I'd felt on my skin for a long time came to a stop.

Hajikano, sleeping on my lap, opened her eyes. She smiled as she saw my face. "Good. You're still here." She sat up and clung to me tightly, rubbing her cheek against mine to be sure I was really there.

"Hey, Hajikano. It seems that I won't have to die yet after all."

"...Really?"

"Really. I guess I can keep staying here."

"Until when?"

"Until, whenever."

"Always?"

"Yes, always."

"You're not lying?"

"Yeah. I've given up on lying to you, Hajikano. So you don't have to act like you're being fooled, either."

After a few seconds of silence, I felt her body suddenly heat up in my arms.

"Yosuke?", Hajikano asked timidly.

"Yeah," I nodded. "Not Hinohara anymore."

Hajikano lifted her head and looked at my face closely.

“Welcome back, Yosuke.”

“Yeah. I’m back.”

Keeping her arms around me, Hajikano shyly smiled and closed her eyes.

And I carried out the “final job” Chigusa had taught me.

Epilogue

This brought an end to my summer of age sixteen. In September, the heat from just days ago seemed like a bad joke, and autumn hit Minagisa in the blink of an eye.

Hajikano began coming to Minagisa First High again, and we walked home together like we had in grade school. It would probably be a while before her memory loss recovered, but she seemed to enjoy being able to experience so many things fresh. Sometimes she would call me “Hinohara” and look apologetic.

Hajikano didn’t draw crying moles anymore. Instead, when something happy happened, she drew a mole on her cheek.

“What kind of mole is that?”, I asked.

“A smiling mole,” she replied. “It’s a sign that I’m really happy, and I want you to know it, Yosuke.”

“Ah, I see.”

I took the marker from her and drew a similar mole on my cheek.

It seemed like it would take a while for Hajikano to get used to Class 1-3. But she was in no hurry. She carefully processed things one at a time, and chose her actions after deep consideration about what these things meant to her.

Lately, my classmate Nagahora was starting to make passes at Hajikano. Maybe he still felt lonely about the absence of Chigusa, even though his memories of her were gone. Every time he talked to Hajikano, she made a worried face and looked to me for help, but she didn’t seem to dislike Nagahora. Once, while he wasn’t around, she said “He’s tiring to talk to, but a good person.” I agreed with that sentiment.

When I checked after summer break, all mention of Chigusa Ogiue was gone from Minagisa First High's records. There really hadn't been such a student at this school from the beginning. Not a single classmate remembered her. I asked Hajikano, but the same phenomenon had occurred even in her diary. Mentions of Chigusa had all vanished, with revisions such that everything still made sense without her. I visited Chigusa's house by myself a few days later, but there was only an empty lot full of weeds in its place.

I continued investigating in various ways, but it seemed I was now the only one who remembered the Chigusa Ogiue at Minagisa First High. No doubt with some intention, she had left herself only in my memory. Whatever that intention was, I was glad for it.

Oh yeah, the other day, I saw Hajikano out with Aya. They both had awkward expressions, but their sisterly relationship seemed favorable. When I visited the house, sometimes Aya would greet me in pajamas. She was itching to know how the relationship between me and Hajikano was going, but I kept it vague and asked how she was getting along with Masafumi. Looked like his relationship with Aya stopped at being an errand boy.

"He's not a bad guy, but..." Aya paused. "I kind of can't tell how serious he is, so it makes it hard to know how to respond."

I'll casually let him know next time we meet, I thought to myself.

I was hanging out with Hinohara more lately. Not to do bad stuff like in middle school, but competing at a batting center for juice, or going to a bowling alley in the town over, watching other people's games, and predicting who would win. Generally useless ways of spending time together.

In the middle of October, I went to see how the real Chigusa

Ogiue was doing. She looked and behaved strangely differently from the woman on the phone, and was for better or worse a normal girl for her age. We talked for about an hour, and then that was it. However, Hinohara happened to accompany me and had an interest in her, so the two were apparently keeping in touch still. Fate is strange sometimes, I thought.

Occasionally, Hajikano and I still invited Hinohara to go stargazing. Since their memories of Chigusa were gone, Hinohara's hostility toward Hajikano seemed to be resolved. Recently it was decided they'd demolish Masukawa Hotel, which made it hard to get inside. So lately, we were walking around town looking for an even better stargazing spot.

I still unconsciously braced myself when walking by public phones. Maybe just like that night, the phone would suddenly ring, a mysterious woman would correctly guess my heart's secrets, and she'd propose a bet. Yet, if I did get a call from her again, I probably wouldn't take the bet. Though I might go along with the conversation, just wanting to hear her voice.

And, one last thing.

I got a call from Yadomura's sister recently. That girl looking for ghosts in the woods.

As I took the receiver, she spoke so excitedly, I could feel it through the phone.

"Mister. I... I found a ghost."

I asked her what in the world she was talking about. But she replied "I'm keeping it secret from you," and hung up.

I intend on going to hear her story soon.

Afterword

Recently, I wrote a short piece on a made-up term called “the summer complex,” and found it had a startlingly major influence. There are people in this world who feel “I’ve never once lived a proper summer,” and every time they see things which they strongly feel to be summer-like, they feel melancholy about the gap between their summers and a “proper summer.” I named this trend the “summer complex” for convenience; however, the term “proper summer” which I used casually and vaguely seemed to grab some people’s hearts. I believe the large approving response can only be attributed to it being “proper summer,” and would not hold true for “proper spring,” “proper autumn,” or “proper winter.”

The proper summer. No one taught you what it was, but it exists in your mind like a memory from a past life, a primal scenery which carries a kind of nostalgia. The clearer this vision is, and the more aware of it you are, and the more estranged your summers are from this vision, the deeper the summer complex. What’s more, seek it as you will, the proper summer only exists in your head. To reveal the secret: the “proper summer” is a combination of all the countless “if only I’d“s you’ve had in your life. Attempting to recreate this summer, well, it’s a game that you’re set up to lose from the start. To give an comparison, it’s like falling in love with a girl you only see in your dreams. Being tormented by “correctness” that doesn’t really exist is a strange thing. But however foolish the vision may be, if you think just once “I wonder, is there someone who’s lived a summer like that out there?”, instantly, that vision acquires the same weight as reality.

A “proper summer” exists in my mind too, and has continued to throw my mind into disarray since I was around 14 years old. Maybe me writing a story about summer now is me struggling to at least reproduce the “proper summer” in the pure framework of a story. Once you’re able to give appropriate names to your feelings, that alone can lighten your mood a little. By telling of my summer with the appropriate words, I believe I’m easing that load just a little.

- Sugaru Miaki